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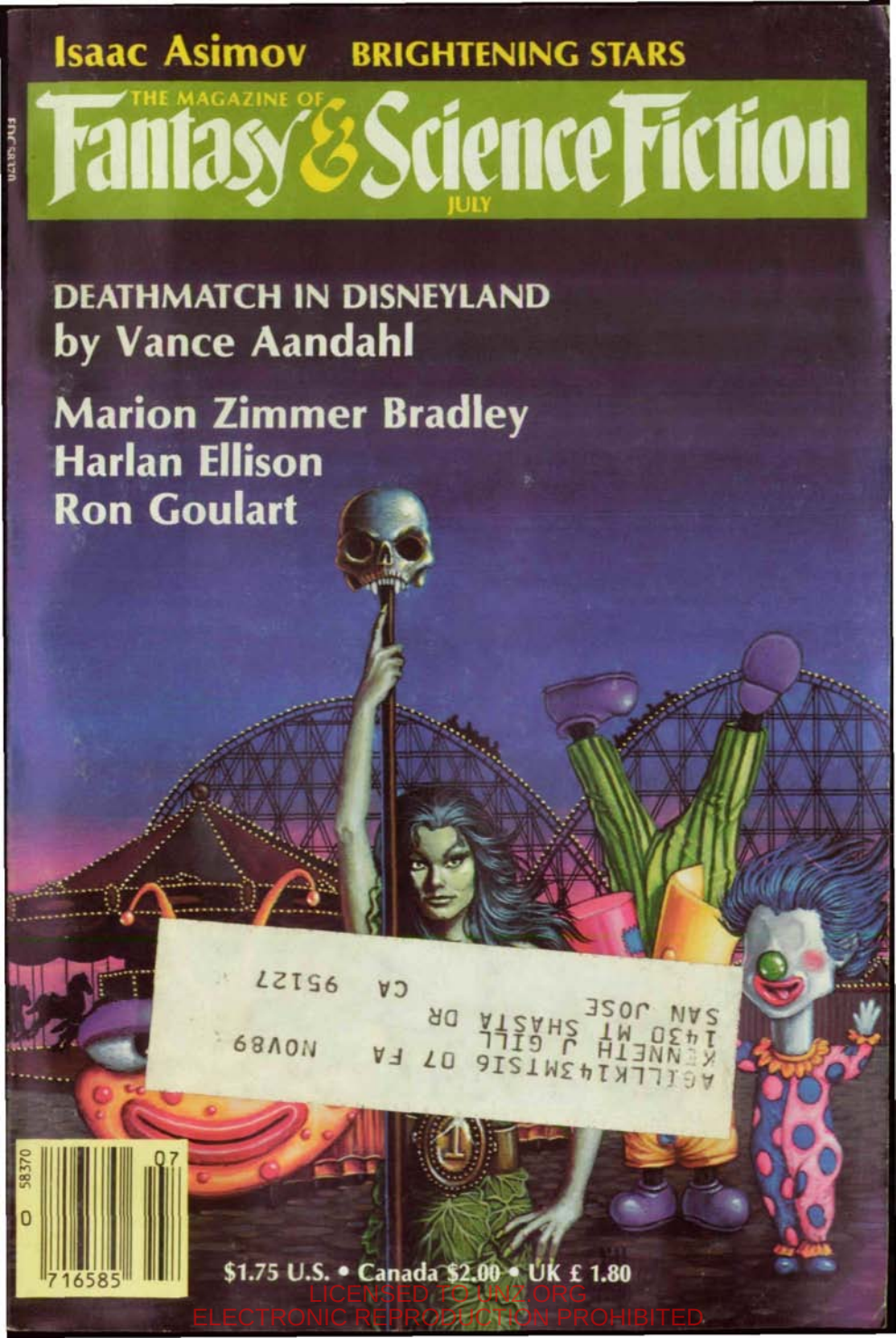

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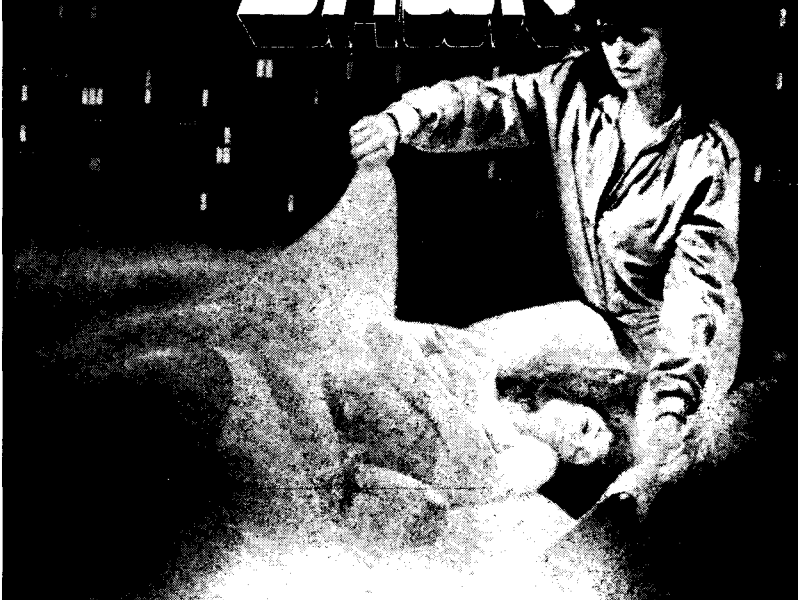

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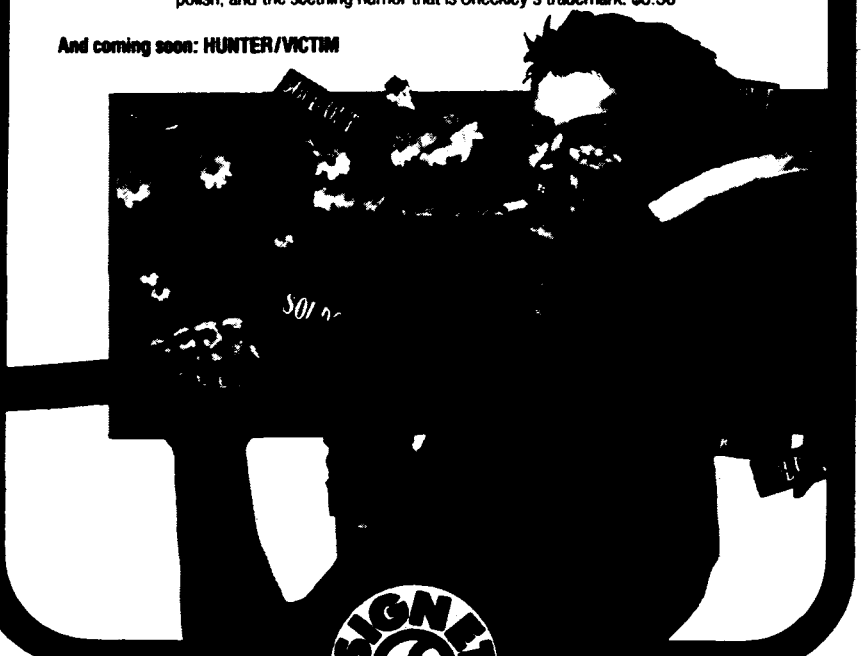

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 73, No. 1, Whole No. 434, July 1987. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.75 per copy. Annual subscription $19.50; $23.50 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 30%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56 Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1987 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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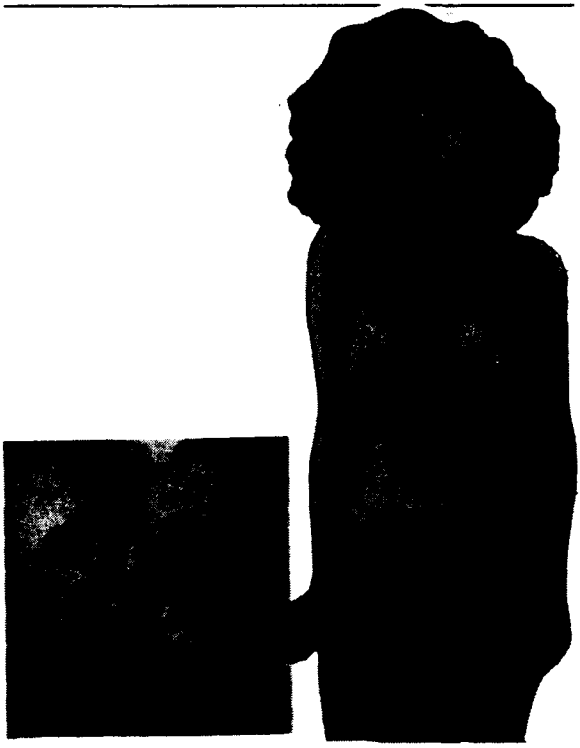

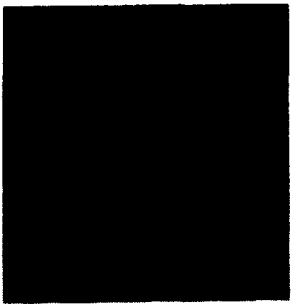

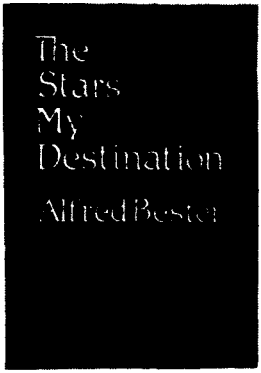

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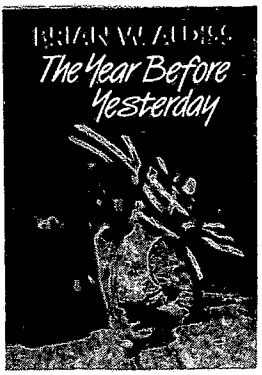

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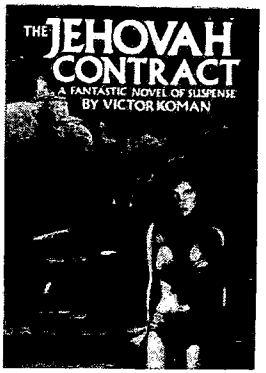

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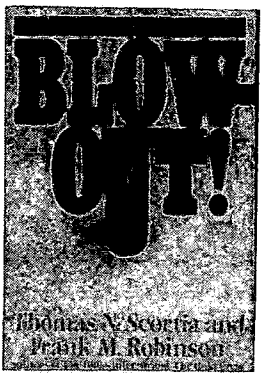

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Rising Waters

BY

PATRICIA FERRARA

And eventually what had been the flood plain of the river became part of the river itself, as age changed the Ohana from a thin, angry sluice into a flat ribbon that rippled in the sunlight, still as a lake. But Rory had not yet been born when his grandparents had deserted their house by the old riverbank and moved far up into the gentle hills to a broad swell of land safe from the runoff of a hundred snowy winters. To him, the river existed with the same reliable constancy as the school bus. Every morning in the summer, he woke up to the river; and every night he slept beside it, thinking it of only average interest.

Mostly he wondered how he could get a ride into town to play the video games at the supermarket. Space Invaders had been his favorite, and he was startled when, in rapid succession, a Pac-Man game displaced it, and then a Millipede game. The constant change was irritating, because his quarter bought more time on a familiar game. His wrist had never got the trick of slipping the gobbling button around the corners, and then the bouncy spiders had proved more than he could handle. The two quarters Grandma allotted per trip bought maybe five minutes of Millipede. Grandma took him to the supermarket only once a week to help with the groceries, unless she forgot something; and since she never forgot anything, he never got any better at the games. Once they had to go back because the milk was sour, and he had to stand with her at the manager's high window while she talked bitterly about out-of-state milk and a sweet-tempered cow that had been dead and gone for fifty years. She'd held on to his arm tightly, grasping at some-

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thing other than her grandson. Afterward she wouldn't let him play even one game, although he'd come all that way with her. She wanted to go straight home, and she drove there silently, her lips forming a mushy rosebud as she pouted and trembled.

Then the great boiling heat of August came, and the water of the river retreated from its banks, leaving several feet of unpleasantly sharp stones embedded in dank clay between the clipped grass and the flood. Then he was glad to be near the river. It was something to do to go down to the riverbank with his lunch in a box and spend the day cooling off in the water and getting hot in the sun. The process tired him out pretty much if he stayed until dinnertime, and the sweltering heat kept it from being boring.

He was lying on the bank one day in August, with a whiff of evening breeze reminding him that it was almost time to go in for dinner. And while he was lying there, thinking about nothing in particular, a peculiar noise drew his attention to the river. The river had never made a noise like that before. He looked west, his hands cupped over his eyes against the sun, and saw that a dark triangular streak lay motionless far out on the waves, jutting hard-edged above the line of the water, but blurry where it merged into the shining ripples. He stood up to get a closer look, but it remained a sharp outline, its details lost in the backlight of the round red sun directly behind it. He stared at it until the setting sun made his eyes water and slit closed; in the meantime, he lost track of the vitally important timing that would land him at the dinner table just as the food came onto it. His grandma was angry with him when he finally came home, and he ate his dinner lukewarm and alone.

The thing was gone when he came back the next day. Yet it had been so odd, not like a log, but geometric, like something someone had made. He let it pass until, a few days later, he flopped down on his towel, fairly winded from a swim, and breathed in great whooshes of air for a few minutes before turning over. As he sighed and vainly rolled west against the glare of the sun, the dark streak reemerged so suddenly that he jumped. The sun was just past meridian, and he could see the object clearly. It was not a triangle at all, but a quadrangle that sort of tilted in the water, and out of it thrust another flat geometric form at an angle to the first. He brooded on the puzzle for a bit until he noticed two pillars or posts propping up the second plane from beneath. The object was a roof, then, sloping down to the overhang of a porch. He debated the probability of this guess being true. He had seen pictures of houses in floods, but the river was bone-dry. He looked down to check his facts. The water stood limpid and still, and three feet back from its banks. And the roof wasn't moving,

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not even rocking on the water. After a bit of brooding, he concluded that if it couldn't have floated down the river, then the river must have uncovered it. The physics of the matter troubled him, but he dismissed the improbabilities. After all, the thing was there.

He watched it from the bank for a while longer, wondering what house it was, when he remembered Grandma's often-repeated story of the old house, and how they had had to desert it after the last flood had wrecked it, when the federal government had made one last payment and refused to insure the place again. No one had ever heard such a thing, Grandma said. That was always the last line of her house chant. He had heard it so often, and he had paid so little attention, that the upshot was, he defined insurance vaguely as something no one had ever heard of. But the appearance of the house in the river made the story interesting, and he pieced odd bits of the tale together from memory and rolled it over in his mind while he looked. This might be the house. He wondered whether he should tell Grandma. But that would mean having to leave it behind while he ran up the hill, and the last time he left the thing alone, it had gone under.

After a while he struck on the idea that he might swim out to it. It was a long way out, over half a mile maybe, but the porch roof was flat enough to serve as a pier. He could rest once he was out there, and with a safe haven halfway in the round trip, it was no farther than he had swum before. And so he plunged in.

The water seemed cooler than it should have been this time of day; after he'd gotten over the shock of the first swim of the morning, the river should feel like bathwater. But this was an adventure, and adventures always made things seem different. He pushed on through the clear water, stopping now and again to look up and correct his course. The house seemed to get no nearer, not for a long time, and he did not look back to see that nonetheless the shore was getting smaller behind him.

He was far out when his efforts were finally repaid by a better look at the house. As he paused and trod water, he could see the weathered shingles making a shaggy web of the roof, and only a great ragged gap in the grid remained inpenetrably black in the distance. This encouragement had to last him a good while longer, for his neck was aching too much for him to keep on looking as he swam. His breathing was getting uncoordinated, too, and occasionally he choked and snorted out an inadvertent gulp of water. But there was nothing for it; he had to keep on paddling to the resting place on top of the porch. When the water suddenly turned tan and thick with churned-up mud from the river bottom, he stopped and looked up again for the first time in

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a long time. The house rose up less than twenty feet from where he swam. It seemed to stand higher out of the water now, and he could see the top of a third pillar holding up the porch roof, and the pediment over a doorway that gaped empty beneath.

He swam through the dirty water to grasp the post closest to him, but it was slick with moss, and his hands slipped. His heart thumped fearfully in his ears. He might be too tired to climb up. His enervated fingers scratched at the rotting wood, but it flaked and splintered in his hands. He pushed his feet up around the pillar, and shimmied and hopped and scrambled until his belly creased up over the edge of the roof. And there he lay for a moment, exhausted, until a creak and a slight tilt indicated the house was listing, and he pushed himself frantically, spread-eagle, out onto the smooth grid of shingles. The creaking stopped, and he tried to rest. But his heart pounded and his nerves sang, and he could not rest.

He was not familiar with the stink of things long buried coming into the air again. It was not a comfortable smell, and as soon as he could catch his breath, he lifted his head up away from the reeking shingles, slick with mud and fungus. His body was covered with patches of the stuff in front. He tried wiping the smears off his face, away from his nose. But he only complicated the stink with a perpetual itch of red clay that clung to him from the water, and the stink and the itch together exasperated him. If he scratched or wriggled, the house creaked and moved; and when he scraped a foot on the roof to ease the itch, down he stepped, dangling into the attic. He pulled his leg back with the frantic delicacy necessary on thin ice, flattening his body out belly-up on the slimy shingles. The warmth of the sun encouraged the foul odor of the house to spread itself around and made black spots flicker in front of his eyes. He closed the lids over his eyes tightly, but the sun shone through each individual cell, and he risked lifting up a forearm over the sockets. This brought the itch to his eyes, but he kept the cool forearm aloft anyway until the red fire died down behind his eyelids and he could breathe regularly.

When he cautiously removed the arm and blinked, he saw that the sun had gone far west of the meridian. He raised himself up slowly, and eased away from the hole he'd made in the roof. He'd have to start swimming back pretty soon. It was getting late. But the tan pool spread out widely, and he felt a certain revulsion toward jumping through its opaque surface.

His cautious movements again irritated the delicate balance of the house, and he lay back down quickly to soothe it. From inside came a slight scuffling sound and then a thump that made the thin membrane of the roof quiver. The noise was startling,

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for Rory had assumed the house had been washed clean by the current of the river. But of course, something could have drifted in through an empty windowframe and rattled around like a fly trying to find its way back out through a screen. The house kept shifting restively despite his stillness as he thought, and he crept carefully over to the end opposite the tilt to appease it.

This maneuver left him only inches from the original hole in the roof, and he could hear quite clearly the rattle and bump as the contents of the house wove from wall to wall. But there was no splashing noise involved, and that was odd. He looked down into the hole, something of his original curiosity rekindling. A sort of drier smell came up, equally as foul as the wet smell outside. He leaned in farther, and still nothing was visible, for little light came in through the two holes in the roof. It looked like some sort of attic or loft.

But he had leaned over too far, and with a faint whoosh, the rotten shingles collapsed feebly inward and dropped him gently on the floor. He grabbed immediately upward at the sky hanging light above him. But after his first lunges failed, he realized that his leaps brought on a chorus of angry squeaks from the house, and he stopped dead until they subsided. It was cold in here, even if he stood in the patches of light, and his teeth chattered as he stood rigidly still from his ankles to his earlobes, and his toes did a little terrified dance on the dry floor. It was dangerous inside, however low the river might be. Something rolled at him from a dark corner, and he jumped, heedless of his movement's effect on the creaking house. As the thing flashed into the sunlight, he recognized it rolling green and white in front of him, and he picked it up. It was a can of peas. It was a new can of peas, with the label dry, the tin ends still shiny. A green giant grinned at him above a heap of perfect green dots. The can was a good bit dented, and the rims were mucky from rolling on soft, rotten wood, but it was only an ordinary can of peas.

His teeth had stopped chattering, although shudders kept seizing his shoulders. He held the can of peas in his hand tightly, for he needed to grip on to something as he struggled to formulate options. The house was teetering constantly now whether he moved or not. He decided that it would be best to go to the lowest part of the sloped roof and poke through the brittle shingles with his hands; and then he would clamber onto the roof and jump off as soon as ever he could, and swim toward shore. His shoulders still ached from the swim out, but it didn't matter; he would make it back. He could float if he had to for a while, and then swim some more. But he had to get started right away. And so he slid his right foot forward like a skater across the

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floor toward the low end of the roof. The floor leaned to follow. Then his left foot slid forward, and a slow, mushy sound squished behind him. He looked back.

There was something else in the corner where the peas came from. The sun threw one great, slanting shaft of light through the biggest hole in the roof, and he could just see a kind of gray mass standing out from the dark wall behind him. But he had no time to explore. He turned to his task again, sliding his feet forward. The gray thing scraped on the planking as the floor tipped under him. The house had bent forward far enough so that he could see the clay water through the gap in the shingles now. He leaned his body toward the opening, keeping his feet still, and one hand clutched at a rafter while the other batted the can of peas at bits of shingle and river ooze. After he'd cleared a hole big enough to jump through, his fingers curled around the rafter gently, and he pulled. It held firm, strong enough to bear his weight. He readied himself to jump. But as he closed his eyes, a vision seized him: he jumped up beautifully, up, out into the water, and the house tumbled in the air and dived after him, turning upside-down over him like an empty basket. He forced his mind away from this, opened his eyes and tossed the can of peas into the river, then clutched at the rafter with both hands. He tried to push the thoughts away, and jerked himself forward to jump; then he pulled back again from the vision of the capsized house, and his little dance of indecision shook the house more, making the gray mass behind him rock and tumble down and then up the floor, down and then up again until the lumpen mass flipped cozily around his legs and came to rest. He froze his fingers onto the rafter and pointed his tightly shut eyes straight up to the sky. His ears rang a bit, and he could hear himself panting. The tangle around his legs was heavy. He tried to move his left leg. It was stuck. He would have to look down to see how to free himself.

The sunlight hit the mass full on as he swiveled one eye down and sideways. A few details confirmed that the thing was human. He swallowed once and said, "He-hello?" There was no answer. He had expected none. He shifted his right foot gently and pushed. The body wobbled, but his left foot was still trapped. He kicked hard, and an arm rolled free from his foot, and for one strangled moment, he saw the face before it shot him screaming up through the roof hole.

After the first fit of screams, he descended into a whimper. He wanted to jump into the clear water and swim, but the clay pool stretched out for yards in front of him, and the body beneath still entangled him, pulling his legs under the water in his thoughts. He crawled away from the

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hole to the far end of the porch, away from the sound of her tumbling in the attic.

The face stood between him and his own eyelids if he shut his eyes, between him and the sun and the water if he dared open them. It was a woman's face, smashed in by great round black marks that made swollen crescents all over it. And he laughed hysterically, mixed up a little with wailing, to think she'd got her head smashed in with a can of peas.

He'd have to yell for help; there was nothing else to do, and he bellowed as loud as he could. But his voice was small and cramped with fear, and the yells didn't carry. The shore was very far away, and he could see that his grandparents' house was beginning to be covered with the shadows of the aspen trees in front. He looked up sharply. The sun had slid almost to the horizon while he was inside the attic. It was still bright on the river, but dark would come quickly once the sun was down; the river would soon be a great mirrored sheen by the darkened shore, and then the river itself would grow dark. His grandma must be looking for him. It was past dinnertime, and she knew he was down by the river. His towel would still be there on the bank. He waved his arms, hoping that she could see him backlit by the sun; he cried out a few times more. He couldn't see anyone, just the faint glow of the white house, and the vivid yellow-green of the trees and grass where the sun hit, and the shadows growing more purple behind them.

But there were police. They had motorboats; even in the dark, he would be able to hear them, see their lights. Yet the shifting house might not wait. It creaked constantly now, no matter what. He tried to think of swimming again; but he couldn't, he just couldn't. He might swim round and round in circles in the dark, unable to see the shore, with the body drifting after him, waiting to ensnare his legs with its dead arms.

Soon the sun was a thin red rim glowing behind the hills, and the river was opaque and shining. He looked around for the last time, he knew, for a long time. And in the distance he saw something: a boat perhaps, for it was moving. He yelled at it, his voice hoarse from the water and the stink. It was coming swiftly, purposefully downriver toward the house, more swiftly than the current would carry it. He yelled again and waved his arms. There was more than one. Five or six specks emerged; they were boats, surely. He stopped yelling for a moment, thinking he would hear a reply; but there was no response, not even a cry muffled by the wind, nor any sound of motors or paddles lapping in the water. The boats came silently toward him, closer and closer, and his voice died in his throat. They carried no flashlights. And as they grew larger, a faint glimmer of light showed

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that the shallow boats streaked forward in their own widening pool of clay-colored water, and the breeze brought him the penetrating sour smell of something long buried as the house gently shifted, and knelt into the water like a trained horse bowing to its rider.

"Up here, light is neither a particle nor a wave. It's a liquid."

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Dome, Michael Reaves and Steve Perry, Berkley, $3.50

Noted:

Arslan, M. J. Engh, Arbor House, $17.95

The ways of commerce are strange, and sometimes rich. Sometimes; not always, either in capital gains or in the production of enjoyable art. There are ways in which they appear to be getting stranger. I suppose in hopes of getting richer, but not in ways that promise much avoidance of the usual percentage of error.

I don't suppose many of you, faithful readers, are surprised to find me once again dealing with this literature as if it were not always produced entirely by divine afflatus. I would like to stress, however, that to my mind this is not bad per se. But it is confusing, and sometimes tragic; always an object for irony.

The literature that lives, in any mode of fiction, is writing that was rewarded by money. The presence of money indicates the presence of a notable number of readers. Ipso facto, the story dwells in a great many memories, and thus has a good statistical chance of becoming embodied in the culture's permanent library.

Now, "permanent" varies in actual duration, as any owner of "permanent press" trousers can testify. So does the point in time at which money

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DAUGHTER OF THE EMPIRE

Raymond E. Feist and Janny Wurts

DOUBLEDAY

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arrives.* There are books which do not sell a huge number on first release, but then sell steadily for years and hive-off numerous reprint editions. In my observation, those are the ones that actually stand the best chance of enduring through at least a half-century, (as many newsstand-borne SF stories already have). Then, once in a while, someone discovers a book not originally published to the mass marketplace for some reason, and it then thrives.

But those are various aspects of the one cultural phenomenon. A story is in mortal trouble if not enough people ever get the chance to endorse it. It's a little like trying to populate a planet by starting with just two sets of genes. I understand from the science-news disseminators that we are all descended from the same female, but the same source tells me that a similar factor accounts for the inspiralling fragility of the cheetah population, and sometimes I don't feel so good myself.

Now a writer — a young, beginning writer; this writer, some years ago — rarely thinks deeply about the money involved. His presumption is that since all the contemporary writers he has ever seen depicted have homes with nifty office furniture, and drive Italian cars, that he will be O.K. as soon as he learns how to write well and the world therefore discovers and rewards him. Perhaps he would rather not think about it deeply. The fact that *Planet Stories* is known to pay only $50 for a 5000-word story, and it takes him three months to produce a final draft of 5000 words, is shunted off into some other register in his mind.

In any event, he has little time for any thoughts not directly connected with perfecting his technique and nurturing his art, and he responds mostly to whatever impulses first led him to his career decision. In other words, he writes what he likes to read.

It isn't until he meets some other would-be writers — in college, say — that he discovers there are complications. Almost certainly, he gets set straight by some swaggerer with the names of obscure journals and barely heard-of bylines readily on his lips. Writing for the masses is pandering, there ain't no one can hold a candle to Herman Hesse, what do you mean you've never read *Remembrance of Things Past*, and so you want to write fantasy; oh, then surely you have read everything Franz Kafka ever wrote.*

** We are not, in this case, discussing those publishers who habitually pay only on lawsuit, or even those publishers who interpret contract deadlines to mean swift compliance by the author and a rather different pace for themselves. There aren't really many of the former, there are getting to be quite a few of the latter, but we shall tackle that at some time when there are likelier fish in the barrel.*

** Kafka — or rather, the Kafka clique — has a lot to answer for. But that, too is another column.*

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All of this is very unsettling. Particularly when your literature instructors include not only the ones who refuse to admit SF into literature but, worse, those gently tolerant souls who certainly do afford it a place. Don't you worry, don't let those flourishes about Siddhartha blind your eyes, you go ahead and do what you're suited for, in that separate place, with its own washrooms and drinking fountains.

Well, old sport, that is the time when you reach certain conclusions about whether you want to idolize *Steppenwolf* or be one. But that, again, is not the immediate point. The immediate point here is that time passes and scar tissue forms over where the nerve-ending used to be, more or less; you put on your own face — or you die, I suppose — and you hoe your own row. But from then on the subject of money is never far off your mind, and money is no longer mere currency; it has developed deep ancillary connotations, and stands for any number of things that go boomp in the cold night while you're dozily wondering if you need the chamberpot more than you need to stay under the covers. The day comes when they give you money, and you wonder if you're tainted. The thing is, you write for a market, and the market forces money on you.

The market doesn't care about your motives, the condition of your integrity, or how closely you remember the lad who simply couldn't keep from writing things down. You thought, once, that the world rewarded service. You perform the service; to yourself, I believe, and to anyone else who takes enjoyment in your expression of it. But your expression is encoded in a physical package that comes on skids at the printer's loading dock and is trucked to depots just as if it were cases of dog food.

The public buys those manufactured units, and puts money in the pockets of publishers, whose vocabulary operates largely in terms of the physical package, not in terms of the decoding that will actually put the story in someone's mind. You adopt that vocabulary, and its implications. Everything you hear and see in relation to what you do is expressed in terms of product, and after a while you tend to speak like a manufacturer too. At industry gatherings — booksellers' expositions, SF conventions, and editorial cocktail parties — you feel the need to keep up your end; you deal in the jargon, striving to retain acceptance, and then you go home and, sometimes, wonder what your motives were. There are so many to choose from, by now in your life. You have market value; you are a reliable source of product/money, and the more money/product you generate, the easier it is to get more money for your share of what was once entirely yours and your readers'.

You deal with editors. Editors

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speak in two tiers. There is, of course, the value of the service, and most editors still respect that, in private. But editors these days are essentially brokers. They represent your product to their publishers' sales force, and they describe it, in optimistic terms, as a product; they present a plausible, professionally toned analysis of its merchantable points. The young editor who began, however marginally, with encouraging authors and improving manuscripts, attains eventually to the prominence where his or her career depends on making effective presentations on product marketing. And publishers who got into the business because they had an affinity for books and literature become corporations. I do not know what they listen for at night; I have met one or two who seem yet distinguishable from casino-operators, catch them in the right moment.

What I am saying is that it's nice if a book is good in itself; what is crucial about it is whether the art director, the blurb writer and the salesman can tune up to that industry ideal — an object around which so much selling technology can be wrapped that, come to think of it, it would sell wildly even if it was the 'phone book. The publisher's staff are each professionals too, and they take pride in the deft exercise of their skills and their art. The ideal exercise of those abilities is represented by a book that sells largely at once, generating immediate significant capital that can then swiftly be re-invested pyramidally.*

Despite all striving, this is not yet a perfected technology, for various reasons Mssrs. Kafka, Proust and Hesse could, indeed, delve into fruitfully but to which comptrollers are totally opaque. (It probably does have something to do with service, or lack of it, in the product considered momentarily as an experience of the reader. But never mind that.) There is, instead, a relentless application and reapplication of the latest surefire marketing expertise to the content of the manuscript and the manufactured item. Successes become embodied as examples of how to do it, failures of identically constituted packages are explained away ingeniously, and an appearance or rationality is strictly maintained. But there are days when, looking at it all, it crosses one's mind that a simpler explanation would be that chickens find holes in fences by pecking compulsively along the ground, one beak-width at a time, until they fail to meet resistance. (This is, of course, a rustic oversimplifica-

**The ultimate aim of corporate publishing is not books that sell well. Books that sell well are a step in the process of generating investment capital. Investment capital, of course, generates further re-investment ad infinitum, and so since there is no theoretical upper limit on the numbers you can weave up, corporate publishing has no ultimate aim. It simply has a process.*

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tion no sophisticated person would believe had anything more than random validity.)

But, enough of this obviously superfluous maundering. Let us turn, instead, to something we can sink our teeth into; that is, books:

Hill & Company, publishers, has found a new market. Noting that such works as *The Little Drummer Girl* and *Gorky Park* have created a great public awareness of the John Le Carre and Martin Cruz Smith bylines, among others they now have on their list, they have reasoned that the public might like to buy permanent copies of early works from these brands . . . er, authors. So they are bringing out hardbound editions of now relatively obscure work hitherto available largely or only in dog-eared paperback.

The first releases in this program include *Call For the Dead* and *A Murder of Quality*, two excellent George Smiley novels by Le Carre about a quarter-century ago, when he was not constrained to blow up a 70,000-word plot into some priceable production with a Rolls Royce facade. They're quite good; as reading matter, probably the best Le Carre there has ever been. More to the market here, Hill has also released *Nightwings*, Martin Cruz Smith's first novel, a horror-fantasy from the mid-1970s.

After *Nightwings*, Smith did a charming short series of murder stories featuring a Gypsy antiques dealer — the similarities to Jonathan Gash's English tales about Lovejoy, and even the watered-down TV series, are striking but not invidious — and then, armed with a crateful of brochures on Moscow and hours at the library, he created *Gorky Park*. He's a good writer; does his homework, delivers carry-you-along scenarios couched in clearly functional prose, and generally speaking rounds it off well. (*Gorky Park* is his technically least impressive work in that latter respect.)

From all that, one may deduce that he is bent on a career as a commercial writer, and is willing to do more work than most at trying to find a metier most acceptable to the largest public. Nothing wrong with that. But he was apparently much younger when he wrote *Nightwings*. It is considerably more than the horror novel that would have been sufficient.

I failed to read it — deliberately — when it first appeared. One more bat opera by a total novice seemed less than the world needed to know about, and all of the original publisher's promotional material inadvertently endorsed that opinion. There was a lot of it; that might have clued me they believed strongly in the book, but I thought I could see why they did. And so all that gloss exactly went astray. Well, even Jove nods . . . for that matter, Jove is gone.

Buy the book. I think you will enjoy it, perhaps immensely. It offers a lot.

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There are, of course, the bats — a flock(?) of vampires of the non shape-changing kind who suddenly infest the book's locale and with their excellently depicted technique begin razoring-open the flesh of whatever hapless beasts and people they come upon in the night. They flow like a thrumming river over the ground and through the air, and leave behind them mutilation, stripped bones, a stench of tarry ammonia, and unclotting wounds.

If you read for horror scenes, they are here, perhaps more horrible because Smith consistently plays them nearly in complete silence. If someone screams, Smith's prose conveys no sound of it; it shows you the contorted body, the flailing arms, the open mouth in its rictus; not a sound emerges, and this is clearly a deliberate and effective technical accomplishment. In contrast, his graphics are beautifully in full color. The essence of a scene of horror around a desert campfire last night is packed into a half-sentence in which you see a freshly stripped skull lying crushed in the tire-track of a fled Jeep.

If you read for the flesh-creeping anticipation of horror, try the carefully prepared penultimate sequence on the incursion into the bats' roosting cave. No question, Smith had a master's instincts even then.

If you read for boy-meets-girl, you get that, too; in this case, exactly as boy-meets-girl fans usually like it, and, perfunctorily, just enough of that. (Got to hang some sort of romance on this somewhere, right?)

The thing is, Smith had not yet been taught that a book should be some one thing, and it, please, not too difficult. Consequently, it is a book whose best audience is (I hope) reading this column.

I wonder if Hill & Company knows that. Probably not. But they may win their bet anyhow, since *Gorky Park* has accustomed the Smith audience to look for a strong thread of cultural anthropology in his work. For us here, what matters is that the culture in *Nightwings* is a fantastic one.

The locale of the book is the Navajo reservation which, large as a respectable state, overlaps northern Arizona. The principal character is Youngman Duran, a reservation deputy sheriff, a Hopi veteran of the military stockade, considered a ne'er-do-well by whites, a confused clown by his tribe, and an obvious lackwit by the slick, buttoned-down Navajos who are depicted as running the reservation like a dukedom and who regard Hopis as burdensome minority trash. Groping for something to be, Duran perhaps believes the theology described to him by old Abner, the medicine man who declares he has decided to end the world and is the first apparent human victim of the bat invasion.

But is he dead? Is there death? When Duran finds him and buries him

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in the traditional manner, he has no pulse but his wounds still bleed through his shroud. When the tribal council later meets in the sacred kiva, were there seven individuals down there, or eight? What opened the grave and left it vacant? When Duran finally goes to confront the bats, just what is it he really sees, perhaps guiding him, and who are the people in the flames?

In a calm, procedural narrative style, Smith — described in Hill's PR copy as half Pueblo Indian — never rationalizes any of this. He just reports it as if it were the only valid description of why things are. The effect is that effect which only the best modern fantasy creates; for a little while, you may well believe you are in the only world there is. A more sophisticated Smith, guided by wise marketers, would have known better than to confuse you like that. But at the time, he was just somebody who often couldn't help but write things down.

Like *Nightwings, Dome* is not a totally slick piece of writing. But that is not for want of trying.

What its co-authors appear to have attempted to do is write *The Poseidon Adventure* leavened with *Earth Abides*. Its locale is a huge mobile underwater "City" in a near-future Pacific. Actually, it's a mining town crossed with a factory ship, composed of linked modules. Submerged, it huffs along filtering minerals and metals out of the seawater, but a careerist manager has launched it prematurely; two of its five power reactors haven't been installed at all, and a third is full of substandard components he ordered slapped-in so he could meet his completion targets. Well, he eventually gets his come-uppance, of course.

His venality has its fortunate aspect. Soon after the ship's departing Hawaii, with a full crew of variously picturesque and loveable characters, World War III releases a virus that kills all animal life on the surface, next wipes out all birds, and is beginning to attack fish at the shallower levels. The world's last surviving humans must hide down deep and perhaps endure through to the stars again someday. And now that the manager is dead, the female head of his Praetorian guard recapitulates history by attempting to set up a dictatorship, but she gets her come-uppance, essentially at the hand of the salt-of-the-earth prole, just as the city is attempting to commandeer the Vietnamese powerplant and the tidal wave hits.

This is kind of like Martin Caidin, kind of like any number of works familiar to readers of bestseller tech thrillers which are not in fact descended from what Hugo Gernsback wrought. It is, by courtesy, SF, but it never for a moment takes you out of yourself. It's marketed as part of the Berkley science fiction line, and Perry and Reaves have appeared on SF

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lists before. But it is not modelled for the SF public, the touch of *Earth Abides* notwithstanding. It's too shrewdly conceived for that, and almost badly enough written.

In truth, it could just as readily have been released as part of Berkley's general series, packaged identically. That, I suppose, will be a cornerstone of the ingenious in-house explanations for why, even with gilt embossing, it did not make back its nut.

Quite some years ago, now, Warner Books brought out an original paperback of *Arslan*, a seriously intended and masterfully executed SF novel by one M.J. Engh, gave it a cover that had something for everybody in its design, except life, and it dropped dead. Well, *Arslan* is a lousy title because nobody running for a train can instantly grasp what it means, and nobody had ever heard of M.J. Engh, who was probably some foreigner. So that explains that.

Meanwhile, Mary Jane Engh had lent me a tattered copy at a small convention in an out-of-the-way town, and it now turns out she didn't even know I was a book reviewer. The more surprised was she when I did an extensive and laudatory retrospective discourse on the book here. It really is an astonishingly adept novel of speculative cultural anthropology, its burden being a chillingly convincing depiction of what happens when a Tamerlane the Great conquers the 20th-century world and sets up headquarters in a small Midwestern American town. I've rarely seen such good fiction as the portraits of both Arslan the conqueror and the high school principal who tediously, methodically, tries to cope with him and his actions by exercising patience and a good heart.

This is Class-A tour de force, and I'd be amazed if you could put it down — or, tell you the truth, I expect you will have to leave it from time to time, and yet not be able to stay away from it for long, because it will be hitting you exactly where you live, with an even-voiced remorselessnes that is — almost — unbearable.

Well, Samuel R. Delany liked it, too. And so between hearing about it from the two of us, David Hartwell tells me, he has now read it, as an editor at Arbor House has brought out a trade edition of this book that failed when it was mass-marketed and cheap, and has caused the creation of promotional copy that attempts to direct it to the right public. That's three of us who now have our hearts in our mouths.* What will you do? What *will* you do with your money with respect to this experience?

It's worth $17.95. That doesn't happen a lot.

I would suggest you buy it. It's too late to wait for the paperback.

**Blechh!*

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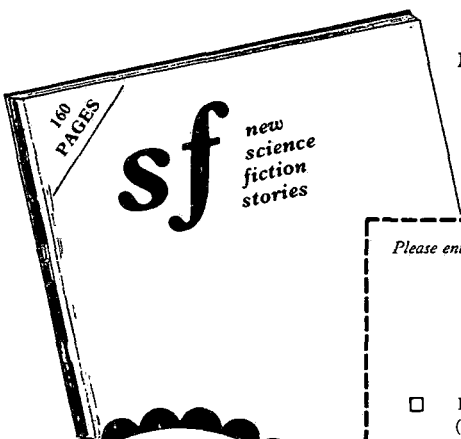

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Books to Look For

by Orson Scott Card

TALES FROM THE PLANET EARTH, Frederik Pohl and Elizabeth Anne Hull, eds. (St. Martin's, cloth 268 pp, $15.95)

Aliens are visiting Earth. Not in person, since the lightspeed limit makes physical interstellar travel impossible. Instead, the aliens of many different races are inhabiting the bodies of human beings, wearing them like reluctant puppets, and using them to accomplish their various purposes on Earth — which range from experimentation to trade to revolution.

It's a fair premise for a shared-world anthology, but this one has an added feature. Every writer represents a different country. Of 18 stories, 9 are translated from other languages — Bulgarian, Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish. Only five were by authors whose native language is English.

This is the first anthology to come from the World SF movement, an active effort to bring together science fiction writers of many nations and languages in order to influence each other and redefine each national literature in light of what writers are doing elsewhere.

I expected this book to be an oddity, a sampler, a work whose chief virtue was not that it was good, but that it existed at all.

I was taken by surprise. Brian W. Aldiss's "Infestation" (English), Tetsu Yano's "The Legend of the Paper Spaceship" (Japan), Carlos M. Federici's "In the Blink of an Eye" (Uruguay), Joseph Nesvadba's "The Divided Carla" (Czechoslovakia), and Somtow Sucharitkul's "Fiddling for Water Buffaloes" (Thailand) are among the finest stories of the year. Others, though flawed, have moments of real brilliance or power: Sam J. Lundwall's "Time Everlasting" (Sweden), Janusz A. Zajdel's "Particularly Difficult Territory" (Poland), Jon Bing's "The Owl of Bear Island" (Norway), Ye Yonglie's "The Thursday Events" (China).

Every writer set his tale in his own country. There is thus a double alienness about many of the stories — not only the alienness of the people possessed, but also the alienness (to the American reader) of the "normal" behavior of the society around them.

It is unfortunate that the book is organized so that some of the weakest stories come early. Yet even the failed stories will open your eyes. Consider it a world tour of science fiction; it

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will make you more appreciative of the best of American sf — and more impatient with sameness, the repetitiveness, the insularity that so often afflicts us.

TIME OUT OF MIND, John R. Maxim, (Houghton-Mifflin, cloth; Tor, paper, 511 pp, $4.50)

Stephen King took horror stories out of the gothic mansions and put them in McDonald's where they belong. It's nice to see John R. Maxim do a similar favor for ghost stories.

The haunting in *Time Out of Mind* is not the apparition-on-the-stairway and strange-noise-in-the-basement we're too, too familiar with. Instead Jonathon Corbin finds himself momentarily possessed. Usually in snowstorms, when the reality of modern Manhattan is blanked out, Corbin walks down streets that are obviously from New York of the 1890s and does things that he can hardly believe he's doing — like pushing a woman into a snowbank and holding her there until she'd dead.

Is he going crazy? He and his lover, Gwen Leamas, both think so at first, but Corbin's "hallucinations" produce too much accurate detail from old New York. With would-be murderers stalking them in the 1980s, Gwen and Jonathon unfold a mystery involving Corbin's own ancestors and a misplaced inheritance.

Horror is not at the heart of this story at all. Love is, and mystery, and a longing for justice. And don't expect any of the standard styles we're used to in urban fantasy. Maxim owes little or nothing to such practitioners of urban horror as King, Grant, Koontz, or (shudder) Barker. Maxim's dedication to Irwin Shaw says all that needs saying.

The book is long, and it reads slowly. It is meant to be lived through, not devoured; even so, we are sometimes told more than we want to know. Yet by the end both mystery and romance are satisfyingly, touchingly resolved, and Maxim has proved that the ghost story can be vivid and powerful without ever having a monster jump out and say boo.

THE WARRIOR WHO CARRIED LIFE, Geoff Ryman, (Allen & Unwin [UK]; Bantam/Spectra [US], paper, 198 pp, $2.95)

Geoffrey Ryman tells stories that are so original they confuse you, so painful you can hardly bear to read them, so beautiful and true that you can never forget them. His novelet "O Happy Day!" in the 1986 anthology *Interzone* was, I thought, the best novelet of last year. And *The Warrior Who Carried Life* proves that he can devastate the reader at any length.

Cara and her family, the squires of an agricultural village, are mutilated by the army of the Galu. Their cause seems hopeless until Cara, acting out the faded rituals of the village women, suddenly brings the ritual magic to

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life. She is given one year to live as another creature, in another shape. But instead of becoming an animal, as in the other women's more ordinary hallucinations, she becomes an even more alien beast — a man. No, a knight in full armor, armor that lives, that serves her like a part of herself.

She learns, however, that her hated enemy cannot be killed in hate. Being murdered is the way Galu reproduces, with three identical Galus rising from the corpse. Galu afflicts her family worse than ever, torturing them with a sentient worm that slowly eats them, speaking through their mouths with their voices.

Grim? Oh yes.

Yet also noble. This is high fantasy, elegantly — even poetically — written. Sweetness is rare in Ryman's world, but it's all the more delicious when it comes. The violence is not random, it is the price of peace. And *light* — there is new illumination at every turn, as he destroys and remakes the creation myth of the Garden of Eden. Ryman understands what fantasy is *for*, and even though the pace is often slow, the language dense, Ryman rewards us well for staying to hear his tale.

UNDER THE WHEEL: Alien Stars Vol. III, Elizabeth Mitchell, ed. (Baen Books, paper, 272 pp, $2.95)

Each volume in Mitchell's *Alien Stars* series consists of three novellas, loosely tied to a single theme. The novella is the orphan child of publishing. Too short to be a book, too long for most magazines, it is still the length of some of the best recent works of science fiction. Think of John Varley's "Persistence of Vision" and "Press Enter," for instance, or Lucius Shepard's "R&R" — what would you cut to make them shorter, or add to lengthen them? You don't mess with perfection.

Alas, not all novellas are perfect. Still, *Alien Stars* is a worthy undertaking, and *Under The Wheel*, third in the series, is largely successful. Starting with the theme of "totalitarianism," Gregory Benford, John M. Ford, and Nancy Springer produced stories that are utterly different — yet epitomize their own approaches to storytelling.

In "As Big as the Ritz," Benford boldly attempts to create a plausible version of the authoritarian utopia he had previously deplored. He proposes that only by dehumanizing the members of such a society can it survive; yet that very process makes its members incompetent to succeed the authoritarian founder. The new leader must be brought in from outside. The ideas are fascinating; the plot and characters, unfortunately, are not.

Springer's "Chance" suffers from the opposite problem. It is a dark fantasy about a lordling who becomes a tyrant when at last he has power; the tale is told from the point of view of the people who loved him most, de-

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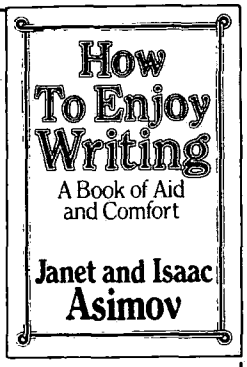

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served most from him, and therefore suffered most at his hands. It's an above-average fantasy, but as a serious examination of tyranny it's pretty thin.

The jewel of the book is John M. Ford's "Fugue State," which may be Ford's best work ever. It is built around the idea that reality is whatever we all agree to remember. Three separate stories unfold, one after the other; each setting is completely unlike the others, and yet characters with the same names go through events that eventually converge into a single, devastating revelation at the end. Ford is one of the best contemporary writers of sf, and here he is writing at the peak — so far — of his form.

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Mary Caraker lives in San Francisco, has been published in Analog, *and recently published her first novel, SEVEN WORLDS (NAL/Signet). The good. strong SF tale you are about to read forms the basis of a second novel, WATERSONG, to be published by Warner Books.*

Out of the Cradle

BY

MARY CARAKER

Two suns, one brilliant and one a faint white glimmer, shone above a crescent of steeply sloping beach. Behind dunes covered with webgrass stretched a mountainous forest as boundless as the sea that battered the shoreline.

In the swells beyond the waves, dark specks moved slowly to the land. A watcher on one of the dunes caught sight of them and ran shouting into the forest.

"They are coming! The swimmers are coming!"

Rintu heard the shout as he lay half drowsing beneath his name tree, and sat up abruptly. "It's much too soon for a landing," he muttered to himself. He gathered the handful of nuts he had found before he had succumbed to an hour of rare laziness, dropped them into his belt pouch, and set off at a run for the shore.

All around him other landlings were emerging from the forest. His friend Boroni waved a greeting, and Rintu joined him.

"They are early again. Too early," Boroni said. He frowned, and the scar tissue on his forehead formed lumpy ridges. Boroni's newskin had never formed properly. He had landed out of season himself, with no one to assist him, and he still bore the external marks of his ordeal.

Rintu's own gray skin was smooth and shiny over his hairless ovoid head. He was less muscular than Boroni, but his long legs easily kept pace. "It's the cold," Rintu said as he ran. He searched the sky for Smallsun, but though there were no clouds over the water, he could discern only a dim glow. He could remember it eye-burning bright, some twenty cycles back when he had landed. Overhead,

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Bigsun shone fiery as usual, but beyond the shelter of the trees and the dunes, the ocean wind whipped away its warmth.

Rintu shivered and drew his fur cloak about his shoulders. They stood on the open beach, watching the bobbing heads of the swimmers as they struggled to shore. Jutting black rocks defined the channel, and within it the current surged and swirled.

Rintu knew every curve and cove of the two-mile stretch of coast that was the lifeline of his tribe. The rocky barrier extended landward in a ridge that cut off his view of the north, but in his mind he could see clearly beyond it: the marshes that should have been verdant with life-sustaining seagreens; then more of the black rock, flat now and indented with basins; the largest, their birthpool, opening to the ocean.

The eggs in the birthpool had become hatchlings and then swimmers, and now, after four season-cycles in the water, they were ready to begin a new kind of existence.

Rintu watched the wind-buffeted specks slowly grow larger. One struck the rocks, lay still, and the skyhunter swooped. Boroni shook his head and frowned again. "It will be worse than last time," he predicted. "It is much too soon for them to lose their waterskins."

Old Jass joined the two males. She pursed her mouth and made disapproving sucking noises. "They will be small," she grumbled; "and we will have to look after them again. The last ones couldn't even find their own food, remember? We had to show them how to do everything."

"We need no more weaklings," Boroni agreed. "If any of these appear unable to take care of themselves, it might be best to leave them on the beach."

"No, we should throw them back to the ocean to grow some more." Jass cackled at her idea of a joke.

Rintu looked at her with ill-concealed aversion. Jass was grossly fat, and her skin had begun to thicken in scaly patches. Soon she would be going back to the water herself, but she was making a bad change.

"No one had better touch my stores." She bared her teeth and tried to claw a hand that was already finlike.

Rintu turned away. He had mated with Jass not long ago, before her change had begun. Now he could not bear to think of it.

Boroni pressed Rintu's arm and pointed. The first of the swimmers were coming in on the crest of a foaming wave. It toppled them as it broke, pounding them into the seabottom. A few crawled to shore, but most were sucked out again as the wave withdrew.

The new landlings, four in all, lay gasping and flopping on the sand. They looked better than Rintu had expected. Their newskins were still raw

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and their limbs flabby, but they appeared to be almost fully grown. These were the largest and strongest, however; the first to survive the waves and the rocks and the skyhunters. Those still battling the surf would, he feared, be much less mature.

Rintu and Boroni and Jass joined the group around the first arrivals, smearing their newskins with oil and helping them to stand. Boroni supported a limp but well-formed figure. "This one will be picking his own dinner by nightfall," he said, chuckling, as he led the new tribesman away.

The second wave of swimmers to wash ashore proved as unpromising as Rintu had foreseen. They were pitifully small, and some had limbs bruised and broken by the rocks. One even had gill slits not completely overgrown. They lay half in the water, choking but barely able to lift their heads. No one moved to help them.

"Hatchlings!" Jass spat out her disgust, and others echoed it. Three of the uninjured ones managed to crawl to the tideline, where they were succored, but those too weak to make it were left where they lay. Rintu thought of the skyhunters and shuddered, but he, too, turned his back. There was no place in the tribe for a landling who would be nothing but a burden.

He helped carry the last of the exhausted survivors to a windless pocket between the dunes. Two males and one female, they opened their eyes as they revived and gazed fearfully at the squatting figures who surrounded them. One by one they rolled from their stomachs to sit up.

They would be acceptable, Rintu thought, undersized though they were. Most likely they would have to be carried to the village, but they would be walking soon. He had stridden from the beach himself, as had most from his hatching, but that had been when the ocean was warm and he had lived longer in his waterskin.

Rintu and his companions exchanged nods. "They can stay in my house tonight," Marek said. He was the tribe's chief hunter, and his words carried authority. "One meal — if we all give something?"

The others agreed, and rose to assist the new landlings to their untried legs. Rintu's arm was not needed, and he walked back to the beach for a final look.

"Pagh! Go back — we don't want a runt like you." Jass, standing alone, shrieked as she kicked at a wrinkled red figure still covered with patches of waterskin. The puniest landling Rintu had ever seen — upright, it would come barely to his waist —had managed to crawl halfway up the beach and fasten its hands around Jass's ankle. She picked up a stone.

Rintu wrested it from her. "No need for that. Leave the hatchling — it will die by itself."

The red figure had loosened its

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grip and lay still. At the water's edge, knots of skyhunters feasted, and Jass looked from them to her intended victim. She shrugged. "You're right. But what an abomination it is." She took Rintu's arm as they started up to the dunes, dragging her feet and breathing with labored gasps.

Rintu suffered the touch. He would pity her, he thought, if she weren't so meanspirited. In normal times, one like her would already be spending hours in a warm tidal pool, perhaps even welcoming the final change. Rintu remembered his own time as a swimmer as one long idyll, and the old ones who had drifted with the hatchlings through the waving seagreens had seemed content, too. But now, with the water colder each season . . . no wonder Jass was resisting so fiercely.

In the forest, Jass went her own way, and Rintu set off for Marek's house. He would share his rintu nuts with the newcomers, fulfilling his promise, and at the same time get another look at them. The female had appeared rather attractive, for all her raw newness.

It was a long walk, for the houses of the village were widely scattered. Massive, gnarled trees towered above Rintu's head, spreading their protective branches over the occasional hut nestled at the base of a broad trunk. Rintu recalled his own first entry into the village; his wonder that it had been exactly as he had seen it in the watersongs of the old ones: leafy paths soft underfoot, a clear pond and a sunlit meadow and a separate dwelling for each member of the tribe. Everything so perfect and so right.

Marek's house was larger than most; he needed space for his horns and skins and dried meat. Instead of leaning on one tree wall, it stretched between two supporting trunks. The sidewalls were built up in the usual fashion of branches and clay and hides, with the roof of woven leaves on crosspoles.

Rintu stooped to enter, and found it already crowded with the three newcomers and Marek and Boroni.

The two older males, reclining on hides, shifted to make room. Even seated they were a sharp contrast in physical types: Marek slight, with a hunter's sinewy body; Boroni the stonecutter overwhelming by sheer bulk. They held themselves stiffly, as if interrupted in mid-quarrel.

The new landlings huddled together at the far end of the hut. Their bodies had been oiled, and their skins were beginning to take on a healthier gray hue, but they still looked to Rintu somehow unfinished. Their ridged necks supported heads that seemed disproportionately large, especially that of the female as her crest began to dry and stand out.

Rintu could not keep from staring. Even in the shadows the new female's crest scales gleamed with hints of red and gold that would be magnificent,

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he knew, in the sunlight. Her face, too, held a promise of beauty, with a soft mouth and large, clear eyes. She sat spread-kneed, her sex a tightly folded bud.

"I've named her," Marek said. "Nithrin. The red pond flower. What do you think?"

Rintu struggled to appear unaffected. "A good name choice. But it will be some time before this flower opens for you, or for anyone else. They are all very young."

"I told Marek it was a mistake to bring them here," Boroni said. "We have never housed the new ones overnight before. If they cannot provide for themselves. . . ."

"How many are there outside?" Rintu asked.

Boroni held up one four-fingered hand. "You saw them. The one I brought in has even started on a shelter. Not a bad one, either."

"That is the way it should be," Rintu agreed. "But there were so few strong ones this time. These three could never live unprotected through the night." He turned to Marek. "Are they walking yet?"

Marek shook his head. "But they will be by morning; I'm sure of it." He added Rintu's nuts to the small pile of fruit and seagreens in front of the newcomers and narrowed his eyes at Boroni. "One night only. Why should it disturb you?"

"It is not the custom." Boroni squared his shoulders and glared back at Marek. "Nor is choosing a name before the ceremony."

"It seems more important to me to assure that there will *be* a ceremony," Marek said. "Remember last time, how many died?"

Boroni did not respond. His eyes strayed to the female and away quickly, suggesting that his concern for breach of custom was at least partly a subterfuge. Nithrin's first mating, Rintu thought, would result in more than one bloody head.

The newcomers began to eat. Rintu nodded to Marek. "A good sign. I say you have done well." He had no reason to stay longer, and followed Boroni out.

Bigsun had gone to rest, and Smallsun shone in the east with a ghostly light that did not warm. It should have been a long-day, Rintu reflected bitterly as he pulled his cloak tightly about him. They were into the season, but Smallsun was no longer strong enough to hold off the night, even for a few hours.

Boroni continued to grumble as he and Rintu followed a winding, dark-shadowed trail. "I had no such comforts on my first night, nor did you or any of our hatching. Nothing saved us but our wits and what we knew from the teachers. What happened to the old ones, that they send us swimmers who are so unready?"

"Perhaps they have no choice," Rintu said. "Perhaps the sea is no longer kind to hatchlings and swimmers."

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Boroni picked a wand and whipped it at encroaching bushes. Rintu could imagine his scowl. "Then. . . ."

Boroni did not finish, and Rintu shared his unvoiced fear. Without waterlives, their kind would perish.

A clump of lupods marked a division of the trail. "Until tomorrow," Rintu said as they separated.

Boroni did not return the sign. "No, this is one ceremony I will miss." His tone remained bitter. "Marek has started the naming already. He and the others can finish it."

Boroni disappeared in the shadows. Rintu stared after him, troubled, until a rustle of undergrowth made him turn. In the glow of the lupods, he stared down into a pair of frightened eyes.

The small creature froze. It was the swimmer he and Jass had left for dead on the beach. Rintu marveled: a miracle, for it to be here. And standing, walking. Surprising strength in that unformed body.

He looked more closely. The newskin, unoiled, was puckered and blistered and oozing blood in places. She was a female, with an unmistakable tight bud but no sign yet of a crest.

Her mouth was blue, and she shivered spasmodically. The cold would finish her during the night, Rintu thought. A pity, for one who had survived such odds.

On an impulse he threw her his cloak. An insane gesture, he knew. Probably useless, too — he could tell from the stinging of the bare skin on his shoulders and arms that there would be ice in the open places by morning.

In his own hut, curled under a thin mossblanket, Rintu regretted the cloak. It had been a spotted chulafur, and he had been lucky to have come by it. He had little skill himself in hunting, and Marek would make him trade dearly for another. He would reclaim the cloak as soon as he could, he decided — whether or not the small one still lived. He had already done too much for her. The tribe would never accept such a one, and it was no kindness to prolong a life that could be nothing but misery. His stomach growled, and he regretted the nuts, too.

His thoughts moved to the next day's naming ceremony. Only seven new landlings. Fewer each time. He recalled his own naming, when he had been one of so many that the clearing had been packed. What would happen to the tribe when no more swimmers came to shore? What would happen to Jass and others like her when they could no longer reenter the ocean? And what would happen to the hatchlings with no old ones to warn them of poisonous greens and rocks where killerfish hunted?

Rintu fell at last into a fitful sleep. He was a swimmer again, sleek in his waterskin, gliding the currents. He heard the song of old Astar as she fol-

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lowed him: a sound-picture of golden beaches and sun-dappled forests and graceful creatures who walked on legs. The longing grew in him, until he began to twist to rid himself of the waterskin that had suddenly become a constricting cage.

He awoke thrashing, amid shreds of his blanket. The dream lingered in fragments, a life that was as distant to him now as the retreating smallsun. It seemed that Astar had been trying to tell him something important, but, try as he might, he couldn't recapture the sense.

He gave up; it was useless to puzzle over dreams. Kicking the torn moss into a corner, he crawled out of his hut. It was small compared to Marek's — one could stand upright only in the tree end — but it was snug and well chinked. The treewall was wide, with low branches over a tightly woven roof.

Rintu adjusted his loinwrap and wished again for his cloak. Bigsun shone dimly through clouds, and Smallsun was still resting. Frost spiked the open patches of tallgrass, and in the forest, shade leaves and vines hung swollen with icy moisture that dripped on him as he searched for his breakfast.

A half hour's foraging yielded only a handful of berries. He ran into Pellen, whose hut stood in the same grove. She was their best climber and had had better luck, and he traded half the berries for a portion of sweet treegourd.

They ate as they walked together to the clearing. Rintu had meant to save his food for the naming feast, but he was too hungry to wait. Pellen was better prepared, carrying on her belt a marsh tuber wrapped in leaves. She had dressed carefully, too, adorning her long, muscular arms with strands of shells that tinkled as she moved.

Though nearly everyone was assembled, there was room to spare in the meadow. Fifty-some landlings, in two rows, circled the seated newcomers. Rintu and Pellen took places, and Jass, as the oldest female, began to chant.

Lors the headman, in his white cape, crouched over the fire heating the carved stone. As the newcomers were led to him — even the three smallest walking well on their own — he branded each on the tender newskin of the shoulder. All bore the pain without a cry, and Rintu joined the press of well-wishers and namers.

Boroni, he saw, had changed his mind and come. The big stonecutter appeared to have lost his ill humor, and even joined in the naming. "Roko," he suggested for the largest male, the one he had befriended. "The name has always been lucky."

There was agreement, the last Roko having been a good forager and curer of hides.

Rintu studed the remaining unnamed ones. One female had a pointed face and a flat brown crest that suggested fur. "She looks like a tree

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cuma," he whispered to Pellen. "And we need another good climber."

Pellen nodded, and shouted the name.

It stuck. Marek presented Nithrin as already named, and one by one all six of the newcomers acquired landling titles.

There should have been seven. Rintu knew what must have happened, but he put off asking.

Finally, Marek confirmed his fears. "One died in the night. Or was killed. Lors found a half-eaten body by the spring."

It was worse than he had thought. "Not skyhunters, surely, in the forest. Could it be shureks?"

"Perhaps, though no one has seen them so near. It could also have been a natural death, and some other animal found the body. These swimmers were so young."

Rintu thought of the unnamed one who wore his cloak. It was hopeless for her, when even the new tribe members might not survive. "How will they manage, especially those three you sheltered?"

Marek kicked at a knotted clump of tallgrass. "Nithrin and the smaller male, Dak — the one with the limp —I've. . . ." He looked up with defiance. "They will remain with me another night. Until they build shelters and learn the ways. What is the harm?"

"None, that I can see." Rintu could ill afford to judge.

Marek relaxed. The crowd was now centered about the fire, which smoked with roasting tubers. Boroni wrestled with Roko and took a mock fall, to laughter. Pellen started the name-dance, and a few others, including Nithrin, followed. Dak and Cuma burned their fingers on tubers and learned the word "hot."

Perhaps he and Marek were worried unduly, Rintu thought; the newcomers seemed to be adapting well. And it could be a blessing that there were so few, with both the seagreen beds and the forest beginning to withhold their bounty. He wondered again about the outcast female. He had been surprised that there had been no mention of another corpse. He looked searchingly around the edges of the clearing, half expecting to spot someone hidden there, watching.

He saw nothing, however. A rumble for the sky and a sudden downpour doused the fire and the festivities. Everyone ran for the trees.

"When will you be hunting again?" Rintu asked Marek as they gained the shelter of the forest.

Marek shrugged. "Maybe in a few days, for meat — I have enough skins now. Do you need one? I see you have lost your cloak."

"What would you trade for?" They started for Lors's house, keeping close under the trees. Dak and Nithrin followed — at a suitable distance, Rintu noted approvingly. Not intrusive, but close enough to watch and listen and learn.

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The tribe regrouped in front of the headman's house, beneath a great triple-trunked gourd tree. The thunder continued, but the natural canopy of broad leaves protected them from the worst of the storm. "A bad omen for a nameday," Rintu heard whispered, but, despite the portent, the prevailing mood was one of determined gaiety. The roasted tubers had been rescued and were passed around, along with gourds and a single bowl of stewed meat and seagreens.

Not a mouthful apiece, Rintu thought. He had contributed nothing, so he did not eat, but those who did seemed to him scarcely better filled than he was. He did drink from the klava jar, and the warmth spread outward from his stomach.

"Hah! Not much of a feast, is it?" Jass squatted next to him, arranging her bulk awkwardly. She reached for the bowl and ate twice her share.

"There should at least have been more seagreens," agreed Marek. "Who went for them?"

"I did, and some others." One-eyed Krull put down the klava jar and spun around. "If you have complaints, go yourself and see the beds. Dying. And worse: a thief was there. A swimmer, or so it looked, taking greens for itself."

"A swimmer? So near shore?"

"In our beds? How could it cross the sandflats?" Shocked responses came from a dozen throats.

Krull's face darkened. "Don't you believe me? I tell you it was a swimmer, though it walked on legs. It had to be — it was barely this high." He held out his arm.

There were gasps. "It had a waterskin?"

"I couldn't tell; it was wrapped in a chulafur. Marek, you had better count your skins."

Marek looked at Rintu sharply. Rintu felt the heat in his face, but said nothing. Jass pressed his arm and shrieked, "It is the one! The land hatchling, the abomination! You should have let me kill it yesterday." She turned to Krull. "Where is it now?"

"We drove it off, across the sandflats. But it had already stolen most of the standing greens. We should guard the beds until we can be sure the robber is gone."

There was talk of this, but the rain continued and no one volunteered to go. The jar of klava went around again, and the seagreen beds became much too far away. Everyone joined in more chants; Marek led a spear dance; and Krull told a long, rambling story about a time he had heard of when Smallsun had been gone for the length of a landlife.

The few who listened responded with indulgent laughter, for Krull was known for his maunderings. Rintu likewise gave it little attention, concerned with his own crowd-pleaser — an inspired imitation of a longbill

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squawking and hopping on one leg. Rewarded with more klava, from then on nothing was clear to him until late in the day when Pellen came into her rutting. He was inflamed as soon as he smelled the musk, and fought wildly with Boroni and Marek and Lors and half a dozen others. Downed early, the klava took over and he lay where he fell, unaware of who was the victor.

When he awoke, in the morning, he was covered with his chulafur. Everyone was gone except Boroni, who was sitting up with his hands to his head. "A shurek's piss, that klava!" he said, groaning.

Rintu silenced him, pointing to Lors's closed doorflap. He urged Boroni to his feet.

Rintu's own head throbbed, and he longed for seagreens. "Let's see if Krull was right about the marshes," he suggested once they were beyond Lors's tree space.

Bigsun was high in the sky by the time they reached the beach, but the seagreen beds were still ice-rimmed. Krull had spoken the truth: the marshes that had always been lush with fleshy stalks were bare and brown, the new growth rotted before it could ripen.

Rintu pulled one of the healthier-looking sprouts, chewed it, and spat.

Boroni did likewise, and cursed. They returned to the beach with muddy feet and no ease for their heads and stomachs. The wind whipped at them, and they sheltered in the dunes. "Lors should have known about the greens," Boroni said. "We should long ago have searched out a new patch."

"Maybe." Rintu looked toward the west where the far sun would normally be appearing. "But none of us expected Smallsun to hide this way. Did you hear Krull's story about the other long cold?"

Boroni shrugged. "Who can believe half of what that one says? He is too close to his change to think clearly — he and Lors both." He leaned close to Rintu, though there was no one to overhear. "We should be thinking now of a new headman, and not leave the choice to Lors. Someone in mid-span — seasoned, but with a good number of cycles remaining."

"Someone like you?" Rintu couldn't help smiling.

Boroni ignored the teasing. "Either of us would serve the tribe well. Marek expects the honor, I know, but there are many who distrust him. This coddling of the newcomers—"

"Marek knows what he does." Rintu would hear no more. Of his two friends, he considered the thoughtful Marek a better candidate for headman than the proud and quick-tempered Boroni. As for himself, he wanted no part of such leadership. All he had ever sought from his landlife was comfort, with enough food and rutting females and no more adventure than an occasional mating fight. At the moment the prospect of still hav-

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ing to search for his breakfast troubled him more than who would be the next headman.

Boroni stalked off in offended dignity, and Rintu followed. Muscales, he thought. Perhaps the vines in the grove by the pond would be bearing. . . .

Boroni stopped, and Rintu caught up with him. Two figures were just emerging from the forest. In the open, they paused and looked around, and Rintu recognized them as Nithrin and Dak.

Nithrin pointed, and the two started off in the direction of the sea-green beds.

Boroni called and motioned them back. "No use. There is nothing there.

"There is no food there," he explained again when they turned around and hesitated. They both wore body wraps of new hide, Dak awkwardly and Nithrin with surprising grace for one unused to clothing.

Dak twisted his stiff skirt and rubbed his stomach. "Eat. Want eat."

Nithrin pulled him by the arm. "Come. Marek has eat. Marek give." She smiled, and her face had all the sweetness of her name flower.

Boroni stiffened. "She's a smart one." He growled the words. "She knows Marek for a soft fool."

Nithrin walked back into the forest with a straight spine and an easy, fluid motion. Dak trailed after her, favoring one foot. His ankle, Rintu saw, was badly swollen.

"Suri should look at that," Rintu said. "One of her poultices might help."

"Not you, too!" Boroni gave Rintu a look of contempt and left him abruptly, melting into the shade of the first trees.

Rintu caught up with Dak and Nithrin. "Does it hurt?" He probed Dak's ankle, and was answered with a yelp of pain. "Come with me," he said. "There is someone who can help you. Our healer."

"Hee-ler?" Dak looked puzzled, but he went with Rintu. Nithrin left them when she came to Marek's trail, and once she was out of sight, Rintu hoisted Dak onto his back.

Suri's house was almost beyond the marked limits of the village. Rintu delivered Dak and left him, his hunger becoming urgent.

It seemed that lately most of his waking hours were spent foraging, tramping miles of trails and never really filling his stomach. It was no life, he thought bitterly, remembering that time when he had first landed and had not needed to search beyond his own grove.

He found no muscales. Bigsun shone bravely over the pond, but unless its partner grew stronger soon, Rintu doubted that the stunted vines would be bearing at all. Still hungry, he started up another trail.

Smallsun disappeared altogether after the worst warm season in mem-

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ory. Lors and Krull traveled two days down the coast and found a healthy patch of seagreens in a protected cove, but it was a long journey for regular foraging and the tribe could not relocate. They had always lived where they were: where their eggs were laid and where the swimmers came ashore.

They had to range farther for forest food, too — into the fastnesses of the hairy ones, the shureks. Dak was slain there, before he had grown to full size.

Rintu helped carry the torn body out of the forest; six bearers for such a light burden. The new landling had still possessed the mind of a swimmer, Rintu thought. They had given him the name of a trail-marker and forced him into that role, but he had been no true Dak; he had run with his limping gait into the unblazed wilds as if it were play.

They left the body on the beach, for the skyhunters. They should have swum it to the rocks, but none of the bearers cared to brave the icy waves. Lors sang the deathsong hastily, and they fled back to the village, to the dismantling of the house that Dak had barely finished.

For a while there was no more hunting, but Marek finally led a party that brought back a twin-horn. There was feasting for a day, and then more hunger.

Pellen's nameday mating turned out to be fruitful, and she laid a clutch of eggs in the birthpool. So did Mim the potter and several other females, more perhaps than usual. Neither Pellen nor any of the others gave a thought to their spawn once they were rid of it, but Rintu wondered how the ocean would receive any hatchlings that swam through the channel. So far Roko and his group were the last new swimmers to land.

Jass completed her transformation into a bloated, flippered sea creature. She could breathe only with difficulty and had to move by humping herself along the ground, but still she delayed entering the water.

No one wanted to come near her, she was so snarly. The newest landlings, especially, regarded her with aversion, and Rintu came upon Cuma and Roko trying to drive her toward the beach by throwing sticks.

"She has to go," they insisted when Rintu stopped them. "It isn't right for her to be here." Cuma's face bore an expression almost of pain.

Song patterns, Rintu thought; how deeply etched they were. He was offended by Jass, too, and though he understood her dilemma, he could not refrain from shouting at her.

Finally, driven by jeers and even threats, the old one dragged herself into the sea.

Her body was washed up four days later.

One who profited was the small outcast, who had somehow managed to keep herself alive, and who had

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continued to be a special target of Jass's vituperation. Before her final change, Jass had even harangued Lors until he organized hunts for the "abomination," but the quarry had always escaped. Rintu had caught occasional glimpses of her lurking around the outskirts of the settlement, but she stayed well away from the houses.

What he had seen was not prepossessing — a scabby face and raggedly growing crest — but he couldn't help feeling a grudging admiration for her toughness. After Jass's rites he circled wide around the village, half hoping to come upon her.

He did not need to search far. Just beyond the pond she stepped from behind a stand of saplings, looking wild as a shurek. "Rintu," she said with a clarity that took him by surprise.

She moved back into the cover, and he followed. "How do you know my name?" he asked. "How do you know words at all?"

"I watch the others. I listen."

The skin on her face was healed, though scarred in places, and her body — what he could see of it through the smelly, uncured furs — did not appear malnourished. She had the half-formed crest of a maturing female, though in stature she was still far below normal.

She grinned at his stare — crookedly, because of a scar pucker on one side of her mouth. "I am a true landling. See." She waggled her fingers and thrust out her feet for his inspection. "All I lack is a name. You helped me before, Rintu." Her voice lingered over the sounds. "Now that the screaming old one is gone, I would be one of you, one of the tribe. Can you give me a name?"

He was taken aback again. "I don't know," he stammered. "Maybe. . . . Yes . . . I suppose I could do it, but it might not be accepted, without a ceremony."

"I don't care. Give me one. Now."

Her gaze was insistent. Her eyes were narrow and deep set; white slits with centers of intense green. Rintu studied her and thought of everything he knew about her. "Embri," he finally said.

"What does it mean?"

"The embri is a stringy waterweed that grows on the rocks where nothing else will root."

"Yes, I have seen it." She cocked her head, and the unscarred corner of her mouth turned up. "And your name. What does it mean?"

He returned her smile. "The rintu is a tree that has food nuts and thick leaves that we use for roofing. If you come into the tribe and build a house, I will weave your roof for you. It is my trade."

"I would like to have a house, and a roof. I think you are well named, too."

Embri would be a strong new landling, Rintu thought, for all her diminutive size. With a bath and proper

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clothing, she might even be halfway presentable. "I hope they take you in," he said. "I'll speak to Lors right away."

He did, though he dared not press too hard.

Lors scratched his neck, thinking. "Is she still so small?"

"Yes, but she is healthy and will grow." Rintu tried to gauge the headman's mood. "We need more in the tribe," he ventured. "And Jass's hatred was ill-founded."

Lors scratched some more, and nodded. "Yes, Jass was crazed by her change. This . . . Embri . . . has proven herself. Bring her to me, and I will give her the mark."

No one welcomed Embri, but neither did they throw sticks. Gradually the tribe accepted her. She was eager to learn all their ways, and she never came back empty-handed from foraging. She willingly joined hunts, too. Marek was amazed by her skill with a spear, and Boroni by her cleverness in devising snares. If anything, she tried to do too much for someone with the name of a waterweed, but who would object when she was so generous in sharing?

The complaints came slowly at first, but they were persistent.

Her eating habits disgusted everyone who knew of them. Treeworts, grubs, and even diggers — no fit food for a landling. "But I see many of you hungry," she said when Rintu tried to remonstrate.

Her house was a joke. It wasn't even properly attached to its tree, but mushroomed upward from a leg-deep hole. She had slept in burrows in the forest and kept warm, she insisted.

Rintu purposely forgot his promise to help with the roof. Embri built it herself, and when he sneaked by to look, he saw a ridiculous thatch of moss and branches and mismatched leaves. It was sure to leak in a storm, he knew; perhaps it would even collapse.

The waterweed female's worst fault, though, was her incessant talk. The forest should have taught her silence, Rintu thought, but it seemed to have had the opposite effect. She questioned everyone about everything — matings, egg laying, the shureks, what they remembered of the waterlife. Things no one else discussed.

She mortified Pellen by actually inspecting the birthpool and reporting that there were no eggs or hatchlings in it. She angered Marek by suggesting that the shureks could be driven away; even claiming (though no one believed her) to have killed one. Lors she offended by asking why the tribal mark was necessary when there were no other landlings.

"But why, what *is* the reason?" she persisted when Rintu came to scold her for the insult to the headman.

"It does not matter; we do not question custom," he said sternly.

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Actually, he had heard tales of other tribes of landlings on the coast, but no one he knew had ever seen them. It was no concern of Embri's, however. She had to learn to control her curiosity and her tongue or she would be an outcast again.

"What else have I done wrong?" Embri asked. They were sitting beneath Embri's tree house, on a day of rare sunshine, she plaiting a basket while Rintu lectured. Embri was always busy, her hands as nimble as her tongue. She had improved somewhat in appearance — at least she was now clean and wore properly cured hides — but Rintu feared that she would always be ugly. Her crest had come in dull and uneven, and she still had in her eyes the untamed look of a forest creature.

"One other thing," he said. "You must not ask questions about the waterlife. It belongs to a time when we were . . . less than landlings, and no one likes to talk about it."

"You are ashamed?"

"No, not exactly that. It's just that this is our life now. Remember how Jass hated you and the other ungrown swimmers? I think you brought it to her mind that she was about to go back. Now, with the ocean so cold, no one wants to think of beginnings or endings."

"I understand." Embri moved closer to him without pausing in her work. "You don't mind talking about it to me, though, do you?" She gave him no time to answer. "Do you remember how it was when you began to lose your waterskin and the old ones sang their landsongs?"

He nodded.

"Well, to me there weren't many songs because I changed so soon and so fast. That's why I have to find out everything now for myself. And why I don't seem to understand about custom."

"But you must, or everyone will avoid you. You will become another Jass."

The warning had effect, but not for long. Soon she was back to prying again, chattering to Roko about her own way of drying hides until he chased her away.

When Rintu saw it, he cringed. She was such an embarrassment, and he had sponsored her.

Nithrin, by contrast, was shy and quiet, and fulfilled her name by becoming more beautiful every day. Her flaming crest was fully extended, and when she walked under Bigsun, her head was surrounded by a gleaming corona. She had the finest house of any of the newcomers, though she had no skill in building, and more cooking pots than anyone else in the village.

Rintu had woven her roof with special care, taking a full day. Like most of the males in the tribe, he eagerly awaited her first mating. It was difficult, however, to predict when a female's heat would come, and

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aside from following Nithrin constantly, there was nothing he could do to assure that he would be in the vicinity at the right time.

He wasn't. He was digging for marsh tubers up at the high spring when Embri came rushing upon him like a stormwind. "Come with me — now — or they will kill each other!" She pushed him when he did not respond fast enough, and he almost fell into the mud.

She steadied him, but continued to urge. "Marek and Boroni. They're fighting for Nithrin, and they're *wild*. You've got to stop them."

He shook her off, his disappointment exploding in a sharp laugh. "So that's all! What do you expect them to do — shake hands and cast lots?"

She stamped her foot, slipping and miring herself to the ankle. "Do you think I'm stupid? I've seen mating fights, but I tell you this is different. They've been at it since high sun and neither will give up." She extricated herself and swiped angrily at her muddy leg. "I thought they were your friends!"

"Where are they?" It wouldn't hurt to take a look, he decided. It just might be serious, for someone like Nithrin.

"Nithrin's house. And hurry."

Infected by Embri's distress, Rintu ran down the entire trail and arrived panting at Nithrin's tree space.

Marek and Boroni circled each other, naked except for loinwraps. They moved with the heaviness of exhaustion, and their labored gasps, when they grappled, seemed torn from their bodies.

Nithrin crouched in her doorway, her eyes wide as lim shells. She looked at Embri and Rintu with no sign of recognition.

Embri held Rintu by the arm. "Don't go near her. You must keep your head, and stop them."

He shook her off, though he had no intention of approaching Nithrin. To catch her scent and enter the fray himself, so late, would be a gross misconduct.

But so would it be to interfere. Marek and Boroni rolled and thrashed, their films of sweat making purchase difficult. Marek obtained a choke hold and pressed until Boroni's eyes bulged, but the bigger male dug his heels into the earth and heaved.

Boroni was on top, and Rintu saw that his greater strength would prevail. Marek still pressed murderously with his thumbs, but Boroni began to pound the hunter's head until Marek loosened his grip.

In any usual contest, Marek would have made the sign of surrender, but his eyes were wild with desperation. He reached into his wrap and drew out a knife.

Embri screamed, and Rintu stepped forward.

He was too late. Marek buried the knife in Boroni's side and Boroni collapsed. Marek pushed the heavy body

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aside and staggered to his feet, his face masklike in the grip of his fever.

He saw Rintu, and the mask slipped. "Get him to Suri. I. . . ."

Nithrin stood up, and he went to her, into the hut, without a backward glance.

"Help me," Rintu said to Embri. He pulled the knife from Boroni's side, just below the fin ridge. Blood welled out, and he slapped on his own belt pouch for a compress.

Embri tied the belt tightly about Boroni's body. "Do you think we can carry him?" She looked dubiously at the huge inert form.

"No, we can drag him. I'll make something." Rintu hastily fashioned a travois from his own cloak and two poles raided from Nithrin's roof. He and Embri rolled Boroni onto it.

The wounded male cried out, and Embri adjusted his bandage. She took one pole and Rintu the other, and together they started off for the healer's.

Embri was uncharacteristically quiet all the way through the forest, and Rintu was grateful. Boroni looked bad. If he died, Rintu knew, Marek could be exiled. In any case, the use of a weapon in a mating fight was a grave offense.

Boroni groaned each time the travois bumped, and his bandage was soaked with blood when they arrived at Suri's hut. The tall healer took him inside and dropped her doorflap.

Embri turned to Rintu and exploded. "It's so stupid, so needless! Why should Marek have had to fight for Nithrin? Everyone knows she prefers him to anyone else, and his feelings are no secret. Why did this happen?"

"Marek shouldn't have used a knife."

She made a gesture of impatience. "I know that. It's not what I meant. Why should they fight at all?"

"It is the way. Marek's and Nithrin's feelings — they have nothing to do with mating. It is not something you can control."

"So I've been told. But all the same, I plan to pick *my* partner."

"Hah! You'll see, when your time comes. You'll go with whoever is nearest, or whoever wins, if there are several. You might think otherwise now, just as I thought often of Nithrin and of how it might be with her. But when you have the fever, there is no thinking, none at all, just your need."

"I will be different," she continued to insist.

Rintu turned his back. It was nothing to talk about, and she never knew when to stop. Her voice went on, but he didn't listen, thinking only of Boroni and Marek and of what might happen.

Suri came to her door. "He will live," she said.

Boroni recovered, but Marek lost much of his standing in the tribe. It would have been worse for him if he

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had not been their best hunter, but the cold continued and so did the need for hides and what meat they could get. Embri flourished on fungi and grubs, while klava dulled the pangs of hunger for the others. What should have been the warm season came and went, with the tribe still in their furs. There was only one landing, and the few swimmers who made it to shore were so hopelessly immature that they were all left on the beach. "Let them do as Embri did," Lors decreed. "If any survive, then we can have a naming ceremony."

"Maybe." Others were unsure even of that. The squirmy creatures with their half-formed limbs looked nothing like landlings. Pellen made a grimace of disgust when she saw them. "Are we to become like shureks, saddled with mewling young? We are not *animals*!"

There was no food in the near woods, though the swimmer-landlings somehow dragged themselves that far. Rintu suspected that Embri carried them from the beach at night and perhaps even fed them, but it was not enough. One by one the bodies were found in the forest.

Pellen and some of the other females were angry that the malformed ones had even survived so long. Rintu followed them when they confronted Embri as she was leaving her house. He wished he could stop feeling responsible for her actions, but he had named her and he couldn't undo it.

"They died, then?" Embri twisted her hands as she faced her accusors.

"Yes, to the last one." Pellen's eyes were as coldly hard as sea rocks. "They were not fit, and we are all glad. You see, it did no good for you to go against our wishes and help them."

Rintu stepped forward. "No one knows who. . . ."

Someone made a rude sound, and suddenly he was finished with defending Embri. She knew what she did, and would have to face the consequence. He shrugged and walked away.

"Come back here!" Embri shouted.

He froze in his tracks.

Embri bent low from the waist, trembling with anger. "Of course I helped them!" She turned from him to Pellen with clenched fists. "You call yourselves landlings, you and your tribe. You say you are not animals, to take care of your young. Well, perish, then like the superior beings you are. Perish in your pride and in your slavish customs, while the shureks take over the land and the killerfish the seas. Tell me, Pellen, Nithrin: Why do you bother to lay your eggs at all?"

Rintu was as stunned as the females. Tears coursed down Embri's darkly mottled face. She raked her crest with her fingers and gave a final despairing cry before she ran off in the direction of the beach.

Rintu waited for an hour before he went looking for her. She was mad,

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he thought, and not to be held accountable. Perhaps it was her strange diet. Most disgusting, though — he had to admit it — her rantings had contained grains of truth.

He found her in the dunes, stretched out on her back. She seemed calmer, but her face was still suffused and her eyes were curiously unfocused.

He knew the reason as soon as he came near and she raised her fur — her sex was fully opened and glistening. She was the last female he would have desired, but the smell of her musk drove away any scruples; he closed his eyes and pretended she was Nithrin.

Rintu avoided her after the mating, and Embri finally left him alone, too. She spent most of her time away from the village, and it was just as well; there was talk that she was the cause of the tribe's continuing bad fortune.

Marek's latest hunt returned empty-handed, with four able tribesmen torn by the teeth of shureks. Three did not recover. The ground hardened with cold, and the fruitvines died, and even gourds and tubers became scarce. Krull and two others went into the final change, but, without the layers of insulating fat beneath their waterskins, they did not survive in the ocean as long as Jass. Were there any old ones left in the sea? Rintu wondered.

He walked along the beach, searching for signs: drifting patches of greens or surfacing spouts.

"No, there is nothing out there." Embri, shivering in wet furs, came up to him from behind.

He didn't question how she knew his thoughts; concern over the last deaths was general. But she had seemed so positive. "How do you know?" He looked at her again. She couldn't have swum out; no one could any longer venture beyound the shallows.

She was wet from the waist, however. Probably digging in the dead seagreen bed, he thought.

"Those last swimmers," she said. "I tried to sing to them as the old ones did to us, but there was nothing to reach. They knew less even than I when I landed. I think they had not been taught at all."

"Then how could they have lived in the water as long as they did?"

She shrugged. "I think there will be no more landings." She hugged herself and danced her feet up and down, but she seemed reluctant to leave.

"Go home and get warm," Rintu said. He was angry with her again; it always happened. "There was no reason for you to look for greens; we all know they are gone. Why do you persist in acting so foolishly?"

She lifted her head and met his gaze. "I wasn't looking for greens; I was at the birthpool. I have been thinking about it, and I decided what to do. I have closed it up, with rocks."

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He stared at her, unable to believe such wild talk. The pool was the size of two houses, and deep. No one person could fill it in.

Her hands, though, were raw and bleeding. "No pool — why they will kill you," he said.

"No, no, you don't understand!" She pulled at his arm and laughed. "I mean, I closed up the little channel, the opening, so no more eggs and hatchlings will be swept out into the ocean. Maybe in the pool they'll have a chance to grow."

She stood on one foot like a runty longbill, looking inordinately pleased with herself. Rintu experienced a wave of helplessness. What could he say to her? Undoubtedly she meant well, but she was so misguided. She had no sense of rightness, of custom, of the way of life — she had said it herself.

Hatchlings had to go to sea, to become swimmers, even if it meant their death. The thought of hatchlings growing in the birthpool, becoming swimmers there, was abhorrent. No landlings would ever suffer such a pervasion.

She chattered on. "We could feed them, in the pool. We could take the place of the old ones. We could—"

"Stop!" he thundered. He seized her shoulder. He had meant to shake her, but she felt so frail, even through the fur, that he checked himself. "No one will permit it," he said more calmly. "They will drive you out, if they see what you have done. You must remove the barrier, now." He pushed her toward the rocks at the end of the beach.

She tore herself from his grasp. "Never! I won't lose my eggs, like all the others. What do I care if I am an outcast again? The village is dead anyway, if you go on as you are now."

He reached out to slap her. It was monstrous, to talk about "my" eggs, and to want to cling to them. It was disgusting, and he was the one who had bred her.

She escaped, twisting her ugly scarred face into a snarl before she ran into dunes.

Rintu climbed over the rocks and looked across the marsh to the birthpool. He imagined fat, thick-skinned, flippered swimmers thrashing about in it. Gross creatures with landling faces. With his face.

He groaned. It would be a shame beyond measure, but he would not let it happen. Embri would not be laying her eggs for some weeks, he figured, estimating on his fingers. He would guarantee that the sea channel was open and stayed open if he had to stand guard every day.

The tide was out, and he was able to cross the sandflats behind the marshes with dry feet. At the birthpool, though, he had to wade in the icy water to heave out one by one the stones that Embri had piled into a dam.

It took him until nightfall. He straight-

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ened up with an aching back and legs that were too numb to feel more pain. As he looked out to sea, the winds seemed to rest for a moment and the surface of the water calmed, as if thanking him for his labors, and became luminous from the sinking sun. He watched the ripples turn from silver to gold to streaky fire, and he felt a warming sense of peace. Smallsun might return, but even if it didn't and the tribe were to die out, it would be done with dignity, as befitted true landlings.

Embri did not attempt to rebuild the dam. She was ill for many days; a chill, Suri said, and a weakness from eggs early-lost.

Rintu was vastly relieved, and determined to keep a safe distance from her in the future. It was an easy resolve, as there was little activity of any kind in the settlement. When the rain froze, falling white on the ground, the villagers were too terrified to leave their houses. They burned continuous fires indoors, though there was little to cook. Rintu lived on his store of nuts and what greens he could find, and slept a great deal.

Embri made light of his defenses by coming to him at night, and though he took her, it was with shame. She should have known — she did know — that it was degrading to repeatedly seek out the same partner. Marek had tried it with Nithrin, and had lost even more of his stature. Rintu feared for his own name, and he had not even Marek's reward.

At least, Rintu thought the next morning, no one knew of their folly. Embri left his house in the darkness, though she had lain in his arms for some time after her heat was done.

The days of Bigsun finally lengthened, and the forest gave food again, but without Smallsun there were no long-days of continuous light. Rintu remembered Krull's story, that the smallsun had once been gone for the forty cycles of a landlife. A dire prospect, he thought, yet some in the tribe must have survived.

Rintu began to forget that the sky had once been brighter. The cheerless forest was his world now. He and Roko went down the coast after seagreens, and on the open beaches it was still bone-chilling cold.

The new seagreen bed continued to bear, however, and the two males carried home heavy packs. Lors declared a feast; not the namefeast it should have been, but a farewell for him. The headman had begun his change, which they all now knew was no longer a final stage but a death sign.

Lors did not pass on the white cape, as everyone had expected. "There is yet time," he said, but Rintu suspected that he could not make a choice. It would be left to a contest, and with Marek in disgrace anyone might prevail.

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Embri did not come to the feast. Rintu had not seen her since the wintry night, and he did not ask after her. He had repaired the roof of nearly every house in the village, but, though hers was badly caved in, she had not asked for his help.

She did not even claim her share of greens. After the feast, his judgment dulled by klava, Rintu gave in to his nagging concern.

Her squat house was empty. It was damp and infested with woodcrawlers, the firepit cold.

Cuma, who had the nearest house, knew little. "I thought she was on a hunt, though why she would go alone. . . . But you know, she has always been strange."

"Did you see her leave?" Rintu asked. "How long has it been?"

"Many days." She held up both hands. "Maybe twice this long. Before that, though, I seldom saw her at home. I don't know where she went, but last time she had a big pack."

So she had gone back to the forest, then. Perhaps it was best, he thought.

"Yes, very strange," Cuma continued. "Especially when she was so near her eggtime."

The klava left Rintu's head in a rush. Would she dare, again? He left Cuma standing with an open mouth as he raced off to the shore.

The birthpool was undisturbed. It was also empty, though half the females in the tribe had visited it in recent weeks.

Rintu crouched low and peered again, searching for the cloudy cluster of eggs that should have been attached to the sides and bottom.

He saw nothing but a few strands of membrane that whipped in the current. Outside the pool the ocean churned wild and deadly.

Embri would never have accepted such a fate for her eggs. Filled with new fears, Rintu began to track her down.

Marek had seen her on the highest trail, and Rintu followed it to its end at the seeping spring. The mud around the pool was recently trampled, but there was no sign of a camp. If Embri had been there for sweet water, she had obtained it and left.

He tried to think as she would. She would need fresh water for herself, but for the eggs or hatchlings, she had to have water from the ocean.

He struck out toward the coast again.

She would not go south and chance discovery by seagreen gatherers. The coast north of them was a tortuous terrain of cliffs and gullies and rocky coves, but he did not have to travel far before he found her.

She had set up her campsite on a narrow strip of sandy beach that was sheltered between great standing rocks. Rintu stayed out of sight, scanning the area. About a tree length from the tent and the pile of firewood, he found what he sought.

Embri had made her own basin at

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the tideline, digging to water and lining the pool with stones. She slept at the lower rim of the pool, as if guarding it or its contents from the incoming waves.

Rintu felt a churning in the pit of his stomach. But when he thought of the other pool, the empty one, he could not bring himself to rush out as a destroyer.

He waited at the nearest of the rock towers, and when Embri awoke, he moved behind it. He watched through a narrow fissure as she opened the pool briefly to the tide, closed it again, and kept watch until the waves receded. She cooked something for herself at an open firepit on the dry sand, then shucked off her furs to wade about in the shallows between the far rocks, where he lost sight of her.

She returned with dripping handfuls of something green. When she fed them to whatever was in the pool, Rintu felt another wave of nausea.

Still, he did not act. Embri's attitude, as she bent over the pool, was something he had never seen. He would have to talk to her, he decided, before he fixed on what to do. He would have to look at what was in the pool.

Embri was tying on her furs when he showed himself. She screamed and reached into the tent, pulling out a short-handled spear.

Her face was tight-lipped and grim. "Stay back." She brandished the weapon, and Rintu stopped.

He held out his hands. "I mean no harm." He tried to speak softly, to allay her fears. "Let me see what you have done. It concerns me. It concerns all of us. We should talk, as landlings and as friends."

"You mean it — as a friend?" Her mouth relaxed a bit, and she lowered her spear. She looked haggard, on the edge of exhaustion.

He made the sign of truth, and it was no pretense. He felt no more anger toward her, but a kind of awe.

"Then come and look." She still held the spear as they walked to the pool. He knelt at the rim, and she stood over him, watching him warily.

A single hatchling lazily circled the pool. It was the length of his two hands and the breadth of one, with well-grown flipper and fin extensions. Rintu could discern the landling form and even something of the facial features beneath the waterskin. He felt the sweat on his own face, but to his surprise he was not as repulsed as he had expected.

"The others all died," Embri said. "The tide took most of the eggs, and those that hatched wouldn't feed. Except this one. It eats, and grows every day. Already the pool is too small." There was pride in her voice. "See, it knows me." She put down her spear and knelt beside Rintu, and the creature swam to her.

She lifted it out of the water.

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"Don't do that!" he cried. "It can't breathe!"

The gill slits of the hatchling opened and closed furiously. Embri put her mouth on the creature's mouth and blew, and the thrashing stopped. Rintu saw the narrow chest expanding, and he remembered when he was a swimmer and his water-breathers had closed; how he had been forced to surface for gasps of air.

Embri raised her head. "It is learning," she said. "If I help, it can stay out for minutes at a time." She looked down at the hatchling with a peculiar expression he had noted before, and it seemed to Rintu that she was less ugly than he remembered.

She replaced the hatchling in the water, where it swam on its back, watching them.

"Yes, the pool is much too small," Rintu said.

"I have started digging another one." Embri pointed to a ragged hole just beyond her camp. "It goes slowly, though; I don't dare to leave the hatchling for long." She started to say something else, but stopped. The unspoken question remained in her eyes.

He backed off, affronted at first and then afraid. Did she really expect him to stay and help her? He didn't think so badly now of her saving the hatchling. It seemed right, for her. But he could never in his wildest projections conceive of playing a personal part in such an undertaking.

Still, there was the fear, as if he could no longer trust himself. "I must be getting back," he said. "It will be dark soon, and the cliffs are treacherous."

"Of course." She stroked the hatchling with her hand and did not look up when he left.

He returned after four handspans of days, concerned about the night frost that had already begun. Visions of a small dead waterform haunted him as he struggled up and down the ravines, and he was unable to convince himself that it might be for the best.

Embri came to meet him with the hatchling, wrapped in a damp moss-blanket, in her arms. "How does it do?" he asked. He kept himself from looking down at her burden.

She held it out.

The hatchling appeared shrunken at first, but then he saw that it was actually longer, though it had lost most of its insulating fat. Only a thin layer of membrane covered the landling face, and on its now recognizable arms and legs the waterskin was cracked and beginning to peel.

"But it isn't even swimmer-sized!" Rintu blurted, shocked. He turned to Embri. "This is what comes of keeping it so much out of the water. Didn't I tell you—"

She ignored his ranting. "It has to

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be living outside before the next bad season starts. In the water it would die." She bent over the hatchling to help it breathe, then started toward the camp.

The new pool was finished. Embri stood beside it, with the hatchling still in her arms. "It swims in there yet, sometimes, but already I think it feels the cold." She tested the water with her foot, shivered, and turned away. She carried her bundle into the tent.

There was barely squatting room inside for the two adults. Embri put down the hatchling and oiled a bit of its exposed newskin.

The creature was so impossibly small and helpless, Rintu thought. And Embri was so thin. How could she keep the hatchling and herself alive in this place? The only provisions he could see in the tent were a few stringy tubers.

He shared his own rations with her, and she ate greedily, feeding the hatchling from her own mouth. Soon it slept.

"Can you bring me more food?" She looked down at her hands, twisting them. "I can't hunt, you see. It needs me, at times, to breathe, and I have to stay close."

Rintu had his own shame, for either to agree or to refuse would be a dishonor. "It is a hard journey, and will get worse," he finally said, temporizing.

"Yes, but. . . ." She traced circles with her fingers on the floor hide. "Nobody would need to know where you were going."

She understood, then, his real concern — that someone would discover his secret. Boroni, who still looked to be headman, or Marek, who might regain face by exposing a more flagrant offense than his own.

No, he thought, it would be better for her to return to the village where she had a warm house and access to the forest, and where he could help her covertly without being absent for suspicious periods.

He suggested it, and she reacted with confusion. "But what will they do to me? What will they do to the hatchling? You said once that they would kill me, for interfering with the births."

"I spoke rashly, in anger. I was overly concerned with the shame. You know we don't usually harm one another."

She started to speak, and he held up his hand. "Not even in mating battles. That . . . between Marek and Boroni . . . was unusual."

"Perhaps, but what about Jass, when I landed? She was ready to crush my head."

He was silent for a long moment. "I thought differently then, too. We didn't know that there would be no more swimmers in the ocean. Now everyone believes there will be no more landings."

She shook her head, unconvinced,

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and he continued to argue. "The worst they will do is avoid you, until they understand what you and the hatchling mean to them. Then they might even give you a new name."

"The animal?" she suggested sourly.

He squeezed her hand and tried to make her smile. "No, someone will make up a new word. One that means 'The female who keeps her young.' That is all that will happen."

She still frowned, but she did not remove her hand. "You will come with me; stay with me?"

He jerked away. She hadn't changed, he thought; she still asked too much.

Outside, curled in his cloak, he forgave her. If she had a mind that worked like that of others, she would not now be sleeping with the hatchling. He would help her back, her and the hatchling, in the morning, but he would not enter the village with them. He would speak up for her later, if any wanted to cast her out, but what she wished was not to be considered.

It was a slow and difficult journey, with Embri cumbered with the hatchling, yet Rintu was oddly sorry when they arrived at their own beach. It was late afternoon, and they stopped in the dunes.

The hatchling had stood the journey well, and showed no signs of distress at being out of the water so long. Rintu had thought to make

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another pool, a hidden one, but they decided it was not necessary.

He began to think his plan would work. "I'll go into the village first," he said. "You wait until dark, then slip in quietly with the hatchling. With luck, no one will notice you."

Embri settled into a hollow of webgrass, clutching the hatchling more tightly than was necessary.

He had difficulty with his voice as he continued: "You can show yourself in the morning, but keep the hatchling inside as long as you can. Until it has a better form. I'll see that you get food, but no one must know."

She nodded, but he could see her chin quivering.

Now don't spoil it, he felt like shouting. You will, I know it; you'll give me away.

He said nothing, however, but turned from them brusquely and half ran toward the forest.

At the first trees he turned and looked back. Even then he thought he could leave them, but when she stood and started toward him, he did not wave her back.

He heard the horrified whispers already, and the jeers, but they did not seem important. What crowded his mind was a plan for the new house he would have to build. He waited until Embri and the hatchling joined him, and they walked into the village together.

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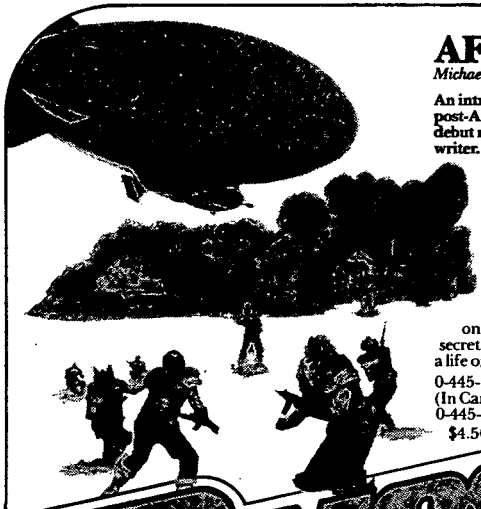

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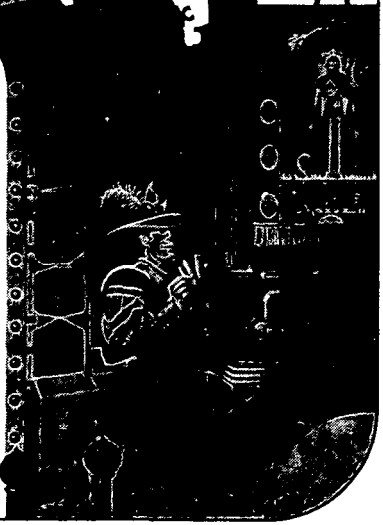

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Larry Tritten's work often combines a light and satiric touch with an entertaining story line, as evidenced by this fantasy about a wayfarer who has the bad fortune to meet up with a family of somewhat excessive virtue. . .

The Dead Woods

BY
LARRY TRITTEN

The sky was bruised with carmine light, the sun a festering phosphorescent pustule as Saran entered the Dead Woods, a region of blackened, stripped, and lifeless trees standing as a bleak epitaph to the lush forest that had once grown there. No bird sang, no animals were present, and as Saran proceeded, he saw that not so much as a dung bug or cinder spider was in evidence. The air stank of flaky ash, and the ground crunched like crystal remnants underfoot. The dead trees stretched over a series of low hummocks and into the distance.

Saran was understandably eager to put the woods behind him. A sense of bane infested the area; he quickened his step. A few minutes later he was halted by the sight of two men ahead, sitting with their backs to a fuliginous tree bole; they were dressed in sackcloth and drinking from an amber bottle they passed back and forth.

"Greeting," called one, seeing Saran, and they both smiled at him.

"Good day," Saran said, approaching. He saw that both of the men had essentially identical features — prognathous jaw, a nose that looked knocked out of kilter, and the bright glitter of tiny porcine eyes under rambling shaggy brows.

"Wayfarer?" one of the men asked, and when Saran answered yes, he proffered the bottle. "Sit a bit and suck a dram with us, footbutcher."

Saran considered; he had a flask of water, but perhaps a jolt of something stronger would put a lilt in his step and take the edge off of the sense of foreboding he had felt since entering the woods. He accepted the bottle and drank, noticing as he did so an

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object at the bottom of the bottle that swirled around there as he tilted it. The liquor had a dry, fruity, intensely alcoholic taste and traced a trail of mellow warmth all the way to Saran's stomach. He held up the bottle and peered within.

"Oh, *that*. . . . It's an eyeball," said one of the men, taking the bottle back from Saran. "Last one to take a draft must eat the orb, which is per ritual. This is a special bottle for celebrating and commemorating the first anniversary of our burning of these woods. The vintners of Sod mark each vintage year with a special bottle, fabulously priced, that is distinguished by the contribution of an eye from one of their family, chosen by lot. Such is tradition."

"I thank you for the drink," Saran said. "Good day, and luck to you. I've leagues to go, and the road is long."

"But you must finish the praxis," the second man said quietly. He took the bottle from the first man and drank heartily. "Such is the way. One drink puts you in the game. You may fetch the eyeball! That'll put a jounce in your step, sure."

"But I am late, I fear," Saran said. "I'd best be along, I think."

"No, no — cannot be," the first man protested in a voice suddenly firm, yet still not unconvivial. "I am Mulk. This is my brother, Cupsidor. Sit; there's no hurry."

Cupsidor eyed Saran warily. "Do not slight tradition in these parts," he said with incipient irritability. His eyes narrowed to slits.

"Well. . . ." Saran took the bottle and drank, his stomach lurching this time. The bottle made a circuit and was given back to him. He observed that it was now scarcely more than an inch full, and, bracing himself, he took a small, carefully measured drink and passed the bottle back to Cupsidor with one small swallow left in it. Cupsidor touched the bottle to his lips, gave an infinitesimal sip, passed it to his brother, who did the same, and the bottle was passed to Saran with the exlamation, "Luck is with you, traveler; the prize of the eye is yours!"

Saran held the bottle indecisively. He considered refusing the final swallow, but as he studied the mutually flat gaze of the brothers, a subliminal cue suggested that he should not; a hint of danger had congealed in his perception of the two. He became palpably conscious of the dagger beneath his blouse. He drank, the eyeball rolled onto his tongue while Mulk and Cupsidor watched, and while the viscous morsel balanced there, Mulk cried, "Show it!" and Saran caught it delicately between his teeth and brandished a grimace at the brothers.

"Chomp!" effused Cupsidor. Saran fully intended to do so, but a gag reflex caused him to spit the eyeball out, and it bounced off Cupsidor's forehead and into his lap.

Mulk stared at him with solemn

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disapproval while Cupsidor glared at the eyeball, which he then slowly picked up and held out to Saran in his large palm, indignation withering his gaze.

"No, I —," Saran began.

"This is bad!" Cupsidor exclaimed severely. "You cannot slight ritual! Did we not extend our hospitality?"

Saran stood, wavering slightly while Mulk and Cupsidor exchanged an aggrieved glance. "This is bad in any case, indeed," Mulk said, "but you may still somewhat awkwardly conclude the ritual."

Saran took a step backward, decisively.

"Please honor our custom," Mulk said in a distraught voice with an undertone of rigid temper.

Saran took another step back, tensed now, and said, "No, I feel a bit out of sorts. . . . I, uh, couldn't eat a thing — but I do thank you for your hospitality, and now I must be on my way. . . ."

As he backed cautiously away, Mulk and Cupsidor stared after him in dismay and anger. For a moment it seemed that he would make his departure successfully, but then Mulk cried, "This *cannot* be allowed — tradition has been insulted!"

Saran drew his dagger, and Cupsidor chuckled. "Now you've stepped into a puddle of muddle," he said with a scowl. Each brother drew a dagger twice as long as Saran's, and they circled him strategically.

Saran feinted; Mulk leapt away. Cupsidor slashed the air a quarter of an inch from Saran's nose, and Saran twisted away with a cry, went into a low crouch, and whirled to face Mulk again. The three daggers reflected glints of weak sunlight. Saran retreated to a tree and put it against his back, facing both brothers, who converged on him at angles.

"This is senseless," Saran protested. "Let me go my way. The liquor has made you contentious. Why risk death?"

Mulk shook his head. "This is of your choosing, traveler. We deny contention. We are quintessentially virtuous, the offspring of a father to whom virtue is the very substance of existence. Put down your weapon, and we will not carve you like a holiday rump, but rather take you to our father who will likely impose penance, then send you from our land."

Saran shook his head. "I don't think so. Your concept of virtue is weird. *You* are weird!"

"You disdain the vintner's eyeball and call *us* weird, outlander!" Cupsidor fumed. To Mulk, he said fervently, "No more than wound him, Brother! His case is a matter for our father's adjudication. Stab his legs, his arse!"

Terror enlivened Saran to face the two with apparent bold courage, although his impulse was to bolt and flee; the odds were not good — yet he stood his ground and returned the two a menacing glower. "My knife

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has drunk more blood than you two bibbers have consumed gutter rust," he said with sudden bluff bravado, deciding to go full hog with the verisimilitude of deadly confidence.

"Ha!" Cupsidor enunciated. "You hold your blade like a chef!"

Carried away with himself, Saran lunged fiercely, the very tip of his dagger cutting a red comma on Cupsidor's chin, and the other fell away like a man rolling backward on a log in water, exclaiming, "Whoa-whoa-ohh!"

The momentary coup gave Saran a rush of satisfaction, but even as he savored it, Cupsidor ran a few yards off, stuck his dagger into a charred tree, snatched up a gnarled and blackened tree bough twice the length of his arm, and sallied back at Saran, wielding the bough like a great two-handed cudgel. The blow connected with Saran's shoulder and knocked him literally off of his feet and to the ground, where, an instant later, he stared up at the sole of Cupsidor's boot as it pressed gingerly down upon his face. "How now, prone lout," Cupsidor laughed. "Shall I stand on your mouth, barbarian?" he asked.

"Cupsidor, be tranquil," his brother said calmly. "This is a matter for Father. Control your emotions." To Saran he said, "Catch your breath and compose yourself. This trouble is all of your own accord. Still, you can expect justice. Our father metes it out unerringly, quid pro quo, in accordance with our values, which is to say, an eye for a tooth!"

"An eye for a tooth seems disproportionate!" Saran objected.

"A metaphor merely," Mulk explained. "The point is, punishment *must* be disproportionate in order to effect the abnegation of sin."

"Where have I sinned?" cried Saran. "You sought to intimidate me!"

Cupsidor removed his foot from Saran's face. "Not so. We shared a custom, which you defiled. Rudely."

"I'll eat the eyeball, then let me go," Saran said. "Where is it?"

Cupsidor retrieved the eyeball from the ground. "No," he said, "this is evidence. The matter now reverts to our father's wisdom. He is just. Fear not."

"It would be more efficient to just rid yourselves of me," Saran argued with his captors, who were, however, stolid in their conviction. Cupsidor pulled Saran to his feet, where he swayed vertiginously for moments before maintaining his balance. His shoulder was laced with barbs and tendrils of pain.

"Where are we going?" Saran asked.

"We live in a cave a mile or so hence," said Mulk, and poked Saran in a buttock with his dagger. "Set out . . . *that* way." He gestured with the dagger.

As they walked along, Saran fretfully wondered about the magnitude of his imbroglio. Speculation was

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merely that — speculative. On the hopeful side, it was heartening that once he had been bested, both brothers had resisted the temptation to brutalize him, determined to defer to their father's view of the matter; on the other hand, he envisioned a father whose sense of justice, as exemplified in the motto "an eye for a tooth," did not favor ostensible malefactors; yet how serious could his offense be — a breach of social etiquette? A *sin*? He sighed dismally and, as they proceeded, asked, "Why did you burn down these woods?"

"Because they were a seething sinkpot of orgiastic sin," Cupsidor said. "The woods proliferated, in both flora and fauna, through aimless copulation. Seed begat seed in an interminable copulatory sequence. Sticky endeavor everywhere! New life was not content to forgo the urge to coition in favor of placid self-fulfilling existence. Sex was a contagion breeding more sex, the plants no less salacious than the animals for their lack of graphic ithyphallicity. Lurid flowers grew everywhere, like ugly muliticolored sores and cankers. Animals burst in profusion from plundered wombs. Shame! Our father set us out to censor these woods, and we did that, creating the placid and sinless beauty that now surrounds us!"

Saran said nothing, but his hope for lenient treatment paled to insignificance. The family was clearly possessed of evangelic zeal, a quality that gave short allowance to those not in precise alignment with its attitudes. Ominously, the father sounded like one afflicted with magisterial delusions of a kind that would likely reinforce the age-old image of justice as a lady in a coma. It remained only for Saran to wonder about the caliber of his punishment. Another day, another dilemma, he reflected pessimistically.

In time the trio came to the mouth of a narrow cave that looked more like a mining excavation than a natural orifice. Cool gloom lay within. Mulk prodded Saran on one buttock with his dagger and said, "Enter, please, and mind your step. A crag or two depends from the ceiling."

Saran stepped into the cool air and moved into the darkness; a turn in the passageway took him abruptly toward an orange effulgence spreading out from lamps set in niches in the rock in a large cavern room ahead. He discerned the shapes of chairs, a table, a bench, implements and canisters on shelves hewn in the rock. At the end of the cavern, a man sat dozing in a large wooden chair; the dull orange light gave rudimentary shape to a slight, bony figure with a thin skull draped in a robe whose filth was evident in the semidarkness.

"Father," Mulk called with quiet urgency.

"Father," Cupsidor echoed, a bit more loudly.

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The skull tilted and came upright — Saran saw then two points of red flame ignite in the gloom as the old man opened his eyes. He had never, he thought with a chill, seen eyes like those on any beast — rat, viper, cat, whatever. . . .

"Hello, boys," a gentle voice said.

"Father, I hope you enjoyed your sleep," Mulk said sweetly.

The old man nodded. "Yes, Mulk. I dreamed. . . ." He gave a great sigh. "I dreamed a wonderful dream in which the world was a stainless paradise, men and women were free of sin — children were brought into the world by huge birds who carried them wrapped in blankets to parents who lived in platonic harmony with no need to touch one another except incidently, because genitalia did not share an ingoble dual procreative/excretory function, but were exclusively excretory, as a truly right-minded deity would have made them in the first place. The world was untainted by carnal sin, and for all those who transgressed in other areas, death by ritual dismemberment, accompanied by the applause of an audience, was mandatory." The old man's eyes gave a wavering lilt, like points of flame in a breeze.

Uh-oh, thought Saran.

"If only dreams could be true," Cupsidor intoned wistfully, and then prodded Saran forward with the tip of his boot. "However, Father, perhaps, as you have often said, a world without sin would be a world without a function for rectitude — so, the eternal wheel grinds on . . . and here is a fresh example of the presence of sin and the need for its destruction by radical example. We bring you a candidate for apostasy!"

The old man studied Saran for long seconds. "What are you accused of, my son?"

Here Mulk briefly recounted the example of Saran's transgression, namely a refusal to eat the commemorative eyeball, which constituted a breach of tradition.

"What have you to say in defense?" the old man asked Saran.

Saran's mind reeled. "Defense?" he asked. "Sir, I was not familiar with your customs or I would certainly have complied and will voluntarily do so now to make amends. My journey is urgent, and I am eager to be along."

"And leave our beautiful woods?" the old man said, with a slighted frown.

Saran was exasperated. "I hope to see them again when I've attended to my duties," he said. "They are indeed unique."

The old man mulled the matter over. He sat in silence for perhaps three minutes, and then said, "Your offense is hardly dastardly, to be sure. It is not, thankfully, carnal, and was merely a product of ignorance and not commission. . . . Yet there is something unpleasantly suggestive about

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you — a whiff of prurience, I fear. Are you sexed?"

"Sexed?" Saran asked weakly.

"No foreigner leaves this cave sexed, if you understand what I mean," the old man said crisply. "No more would I place a filthy text among immaculate tomes. You must be sexually undone; this service I perform for the world gratis. You must as well renounce your mother for a randy whore, since the wombs of women are the filthy cellars where the preserves of sexual corruption are cooked and stored. You must also forfeit one of your eyes in recompense for the one depredated. Then you may go on your way."

Saran contemplated a swift wild melee and a dash for the mouth of the cave — yet it was doubtful that he would succeed with Mulk's dagger poised; his mind groped wildly, and within an instant Cupsidor had pinned his arms painfully behind him, transfixing him.

"Please renounce your mother, then we shall put you in the hole until ritual emasculation and mutilation."

Saran was silent.

"Take the eye out now, Mulk," said the old man.

"My mother was a randy whore!" Saran slurred through clenched teeth, rage pounding in his mind. And now a terrible resolve came over him, a resolve like an aura of fine light.

The old man said, "I think you consider me harsh in my judgment, traveler, but such is not so. I am dedicated to a better world, one in which no man must again suffer the indignity of making his corporeal debut from an orifice that also ejects waste. . . ."

"You seek the death of humanity!" Saran flared. "You hate the beauty of life! Can life exist without sex?"

"Ah," smiled the old man, and chuckled knowingly, "indeed it can, my sin-loving friend. I am convinced that the male essence can be used to spontaneously generate androgynous beings."

"How so?" Saran scoffed.

"I am working on it," the old man said smugly. He made a gesture, and Mulk wrapped a rope around Saran's waist. He led him to a corner, bade him sit on the lip of a great stone hole, then lowered him within. Saran's back thumped and scraped against spurs of rock as he descended rapidly, legs dangling. Something cold and pulpy that writhed brushed against his neck, and his heart lurched. He landed at the bottom of the pit in trembling fear.

"Undo the rope," Mulk called down.

Saran hestitated, then angrily complied, and the rope was hauled up.

"May your dreams be as sweet as my father's," Mulk called. "I will see you later!"

Saran languished, his body curled in a virtual fetal position in defense against the unknown milieu of the

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hole: he fancied himself among a plethora of horrifying creatures, insects, slugs, and the like; the rock was damp, cold; only after minutes did he gradually uncoil a bit. He observed by very tentative probing with a foot that the bottom of the hole was perhaps four feet across; it was, he estimated, about twenty feet deep.

Saran could only wait now . . . and think. An absolutely unique incentive invested his mind. He envisioned himself with one eye and desireless in a world where the beauty of women stimulated the joy of passion. These monsters, madmen! Saran sucked in air, breathing deeply, and with a force of effort suppressed his rage, which he knew would only debilitate his efficacy. Yet what could he conceivably do? His mind whirled like a carousel. He calmed himself and slowed the motion of his thought. Delusions, he reflected, were self-sustaining convictions not substantiated by mundane evidence: like cacti they grew stubbornly against the grain of the environment . . . but suppose a delusion were given the sunshine and rain of unfamiliar corroboration? Could the vanity that comprised its roots fail to thirstily respond?

"Mulk!" Saran bellowed. There was no reply, and he called out again, then again, until he heard movement above.

Mulk called down, "What do you want?"

"I am ready to recognize your good father," Saran said. "He has passed the test. Bring him at once and retire!"

Mulk laughed. "What do you babble?"

"I am a traveler, Mulk, true, and I have traveled from celestial precincts where the spirits of all who ever died on this earth likve in paradisaical asexual bliss. Your father's name vibrates across the ether and rings golden bells in our infinite towers — a man who *exalts* the spirit! Existence here is the bitter seed from which this happy afterlife grows, and your father, alone among men, has the wisdom to seek to implement the germ of asexual eudaemonia in this sad, flesh-anchored world. He is an explorer of morality unparalleled in history. We glorify him! Statues are hewn from planets in his likeness, and comets like cosmic fireworks light the heavens in his name. I have come to consecrate all he is; he has passed the test, and will soon be transmuted — *hurry*, the hour is nigh!"

There was a momentary silence, during which Saran was acutely conscious of the sweat dampening his forehead, and then he heard Mulk wordlessly depart.

Moments later, Balk's voice hailed down, "Yes . . . what is this?"

"Please send away your sons, exalted Balk," Saran replied. "A cosmic ordination is at hand, and the words selected for your glorification are taken from the Ineffable Lexicon —

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they will destroy the hearing of those still held in thrall by the prison of flesh!"

"What words are these!?" Balk exclaimed.

Saran repeated what he had said to Mulk, with a rather more hortatory emphasis, and concluded with, "You have bridged the void between this world of flesh and our grand realm of spirit and are a man whose life is destined to be celebrated at a party attended by spirits of all the good people who ever lived. Make ready, wonderous Balk!"

"I am apotheosized, I am apotheosized!" Balk exclaimed excitedly.

"Haul me out of here — call Mulk, then send him hence!"

"Why not levitate?" Balk suggested, yet with no clear suspicion, so intoxicated was he.

"Because I am flesh-bound. . . . Hurry now," Saran called with intensity.

Moments later, Saran stood beside the old man in the dim light of the cave. Mulk gave him a single penetrating glance, then hurried away.

"Wait yonder, beyond the cave," Saran called, "then you can join the celebration." He turned to Balk and drew himself up with a towering presence as if he were being slowly inflated; then he knelt before the old man and began to incant with fervor, "Ageless Spirit, Transcendent One, Champion of the Metaplasm, Escapee from the Dermal Dungheap, Father of Fathers, Grand Spelunker of the Caves of Cerebration, Fabled Explorer, Big Who, and Man About the Universe, *feel* your flesh, feel the *feel* of your flesh, *feel* my supernatural touch, *loosen* your flesh, radiate your spirit, prepare to *transcend* the flesh. . . ."

So chanting, Saran began to touch the old man lightly, on the head, the shoulder, the rib cage, lower to the hip, lightly on the thigh. "Speak, Grand One, speak!" Saran rasped, and the old man began to ululate in the manner of tribal song, then broke into an impassioned babble of arcane language, the vowels and consonants crashing and tangling together to form sounds of an unimaginable sort. Saran embraced the old man gently, hugged him, then squeezed tighter and tighter, slipping one hand over Balk's mouth to stop the quavering ejaculations of gibber; in a trice he had gagged the old man with his empty money pouch and torn a strip of cloth from Balk's filthy robe, which he substituted as a more effective gag. He took up Mulk's rope and girdled it around Balk's waist, lowered him indelicately into the rock chute, and tied the end of the rope to a nearby projection of rock.

He took up a longbow and a sheaf of arrows leaning against a wall of the cave, stuck the sheaf down the back of his blouse, nocked an arrow to the bowstring, and went to the mouth of the cave.

Mulk and Cupsidor stood fifty

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yards or so distant. When they saw him framed in the light at the mouth of the cave, they turned and began to run. Saran fired an arrow with ardor, aiming for Cupsidor's buttocks, and the shaft, to his surprise, flew straight and true to skewer one of them, bringing him sprawling down with a frightened cry. Saran had already nocked another arrow and shouted, "Halt, Mulk, or die!" — an ultimatum that froze Mulk in his tracks, since there were no options of shelter at hand.

"Daggers on the ground!" Saran commanded as he approached, with the bow still drawn, and Mulk threw his down, Cupsidor too rattled with pain to respond as he groaned and twisted on the ground. "Now your brother's dagger," Saran said, and Mulk found it, tossing it aside while Cupsidor writhed at his feet.

"Carry your brother back into the cave," Saran instructed Mulk, who blinked at him with narrowed eyes and said, "Let me take this arrow out. . . ."

Saran nodded, and Mulk bent to the task with a grisly frown. Cupsidor shuddered with fear, glaring at Saran, and Mulk firmly snatched the shaft free, eliciting a scream of pain from his brother. After a bit of awkward maneuvering, he hefted Cupsidor onto his back, and Saran walked watchfully behind them into the cave, where Mulk settled Cupsidor into a chair, then turned at the same moment the iron skillet Saran had picked up was whizzing through the air to strike him a stunning blow. Saran went to the pit, unwound the end of the rope, gave it a premonitory tug to find that Balk had removed the other end from his waist, then pulled it up; he roped Cupsidor, who was too dazed and pained to protest, dragged him to the hole, and lowered him in. "Remove the rope," he called down, and when it was done, he bound Mulk, who was semiconscious and woozy, and lowered him.

"Are you comfortable?" he inquired of the three.

"Traveler," Mulk called up in a forceless voice, "listen for a moment, will you?"

"I'm all ears," Saran said.

"It would appear we are governed by mutually irreconcilable points of view, ours righteous, yours contrary to that grain — yet you do not intend to abandon us here, do you?"

"Why not?"

"Conscience!" Mulk exclaimed. "We can yet save you, at the trivial expense of an eye and a defanging of the primal snake!"

"Is there any money up here?" Saran asked.

"In the rock trough adjacent to the middle lantern. Hundreds of maxims!"

Saran's spirits lifted. He probed the designated niche and came up with a large, heavy purse, which he glanced inside, then slipped into a pocket.

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"Traveler!" Mulk cried.

"What?"

"Do not kill us! Ennoble yourself by giving us our lives."

"What do you do for amusement?" Saran asked.

"What?"

"Do you dance?"

There was a pause before Mulk answered, "Dancing is lascivious."

"Even dancing alone?"

"*Pointless*. . . ."

"You drink, eh?"

"Indeed! We drink to find truth in stupor, because the grape enlightens us."

"Do you feast?"

"Indeed! We eat quantities of weed, which is not invested with the taint of floral adornment, and sugar!"

"What do you do for amusement?"

"Amusement? Musing is frivolous! We walk, we sit, we feel, we drink. We let our father hit us with rocks."

"Do you enjoy the beauty of the world?"

"Of course — we walk in our beautiful woods and reflect!"

Saran gave a sigh. He said, "The problem of your confinement is simply solved. By standing each on the other's shoulders, you will give enough elevation to the topmost to winnow up to the surface. Considering the condition of Cupsidor's backside and your father's frail physique, however, a prodigious resolve and heroic exertion will be necessary. Yet zeal accomplished miracles. And so I bid you good-bye."

There was silence in the pit. Saran called, "Good-bye Balk. Beware of strangers bearing gifts of flattery for your mad vanity."

After several moments of silence, a thin voice said, "Go hence, demon!"

Saran left the cave. In the nearby village of Sod, after a sumptuous meal and a variety of aperitifs, he purchased several bags of seed — wood fern, wild rose, lover's tongue, violet, monkbane, paint wheel, morning Priapus, shooting gold, lady's-slipper, mountain lilac, winter dream, honey flask, silkgrass, red apple, satinwood, purple oak, bride's cherry, pine, candywood, subliminal girl, and many others, which he employed a select group of twenty men to expertly plant throughout the Dead Woods and for scores of miles all about. It cost him 120 maxims. But it was worth it.

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Installment 24: *In Which Flora and Fauna Come to a Last Minute Rescue, Thereby Preventing the Forlorn from Handing It All Over to the Cockroaches*

I was talking to Woody Allen the other afternoon, as we sat together in a bathyscaphe at the bottom of the Cayman Trench, trying to decide if marshmallow topping on our hot fudge sundaes was Us or Non-Us, and he looked at me out of the middle of a conversation about something else entirely, and he asked me, "How come they've never given me a Hugo award? Whaddaya think, anti-Semitism?"

Startled? Well, just you bet I was. It took me a while to recover, and while so doing I kinda fumfuh'd and assured him, "It's not because you're a Jew. They're *forever* giving Hugos to Jews. They gave one just a while ago to Orson Scott Card, and *he's* a Jew. They even gave me one last year, and I'm *sure* they know I'm Jewish. Of course, they keep nominating Silverberg and then give the award to anybody else in the category, so maybe it has something to do with *sounding* as if you're Jewish. We could get Sam Moskowitz to do a paper on it."

Then I shrugged and said, "What the hell do you expect from such schmucks? They gave a Hugo to that piece of drippy dreck, *Back to the Future*, and ignored *Brazil*. They didn't even put *The Purple Rose of Cairo* on the final ballot. Go figure."

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Woody looked forlorn. I was getting a tot forlorn myself. "But I've done so *much* fantasy and science fiction," he said. There was a lamentable *Weltschmerz* suffusing his words, a gray threnody undertoning his precise phraseology. "*Sleeper* was pure sf. So was *Zelig*. And what about that flying saucer at the end of *Stardust Memories*? Or the fantasy subtext of *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*; or the sperm fantasy segment in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex (But Etcetera)*? I bet if L. Ron Hubbard had written *Purple Rose of Cairo* they'd have given it a Hugo . . . I mean, it *is* sort of a hip, updated version of TYPEWRITER IN THE SKY. Pass the marshmallow topping."

Well, after we surfaced — a bit too rapidly and Woody got the bends and had to be admitted to Flower & Fifth Avenue Hospital — I decided to put some megawattage of thought into this apparent unfairness, prompted by Woody's last words to me as he was schlepped away on the gurney: "Do you think they'll even notice that my new film, RADIO DAYS (Orion Pictures), is a loving tribute to the sense of wonder?"

So I thunk about it some heavy. One doesn't like to think s/he is wasting his/her time on a species that watches wrestling on television — staged bogus "feuds" everyone *knows* are lousy choreography neither The Supremes nor The Temptations would tolerate, among grown men who, if they dressed that way in the city streets, would not only make Mr. Blackwell's Worst-Dressed List every year, but might be netted and taken in for psychiatric evaluation — voluntarily buys Barry Manilow, Prince and Beastie Boys albums; bans forty-five textbooks in Alabama because they contain humanistic values, on the bonkers theory that "humanism" is a religion; complains because it isn't permitted to fuck up other people's lungs with cigarette smoke on the Me-First grounds that their civil rights are being infringed; and gives Hugos to dopey flicks like *Back to the Future* while ignoring *Brazil* and *The Purple Rose of Cairo*.

I mean, if you don't mind slapstick burping from alien critters, then I suppose *Enemy Mine* is a great film; but by the same judgment, so is *Porky's*.

And I was ready to pack it in, throw up my hands as well as my lunch, and just say to hell with it, give the whole inhabited parking lot to the cockroaches!

But suddenly I remembered this great quote from John Simon, a critic most of you can't stand because he's smarter than you and I and George Bush, *en masse, en grande tenue, en casserole*; and just because he had the honesty once to point out that Liza Minelli has about as much talent as a rug-beater and looks a whole lot like a plucked chicken, you all get down on his case and think him a

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meanie. Well, I'm here to tell you he's no meaner than I. And so . . . he said this thing that gave me pause:

"The ultimate evil is the weakness, cowardice, that is one of the constituents of so much human nature. When, rarely, unalloyed nobility does occur, its chances of prevailing are slim. Yet it exists, and its mere existence is reason enough for not wiping the name of mankind off the slate."

The thought of nobility, as manifested in the art and craft of Woody Allen, came to the rescue. In a week during which I sat through the entertaining but outstandingly mindless *Lethal Weapon; Heat*, the latest Burt Reynolds gawdawfuller, made even more unpalatable by having been lugubriously scripted by William Goldman from his dreary novel (a situation that distresses me more than I can say, for one of my all-time favorite writers has been Bill Goldman, whose fiction — with intermittent echoes of the books of grandeur — THE TEMPLE OF GOLD, THE THING OF IT IS, NO WAY TO TREAT A LADY, SOLDIER IN THE RAIN, THE SILENT GONDOLIERS and MARATHON MAN — for the past eleven years has seemed to me more and more slapdash, more and more written as waystation incarnation on the way to becoming screenplays); and *Mannequin*, a sophomoric "youth-oriented" ripoff of *One Touch of Venus, Pygmalion* and John Collier's "Evening Primrose," well, in such a week the thought of Woody Allen somehow keeps me from taking the gas pipe, saves the world from being consigned to the *cucarachas*.

But I think of Woody lying there in the hospital, losing all fight to live as he becomes more forlorn in the contemplation that the fans who vote the Hugo awards will not understand that *Radio Days* is a wondrous paean to the joys of imagination. Is the cockroach creator equivalent of Woody waiting to be born out there in some damp sewer? Will the insects have more love for *their* special visionaries? On some day a mere dozen million years from now, will the Academy of Orthopterous Arts & Sciences convey to that splendid *Periplaneta americana*, all six legs' worth of him, the entomological equivalent of an Oscar, while insect fandom bestows the Jiminy on *Larva Trek IV*?

My mind whirls.

Can I be the only reader of fantastic literature to perceive that Woody Allen has been, and continues to be, one of our best filmic interpreters of that *je ne sais quoi* we call "the sense of wonder"? Surely not. Surely some other observer of the flickering screen image has stumbled on this obvious truth!

But I search in vain through all the treatises on Woody, and I find no support for my theory. Nowhere outside the specialist semiotics of cinema lucubration (do I speak their langwidge or don't I!?) analyzing *The Terminator* till one could retch; no-

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where in the totality of non-fantasy incunabula. They talk of his ambivalence between roots as a Brooklyn Jew and foliage as an adult who wants to make it with *goyishe* cheerleaders. They prate of his influences, from Wittgenstein to Ingmar Bergman. They totemize him as the germinal influence in raising the nerd to hunk status. But nowhere does anyone simply say, "This guy has a for-real science-fictional-fantasy outlook."

So in the spirit of unalloyed nobility, I bring to the wandering attention of the genre audience that has poured millions into the pockets of Spielberg and Lucas, the advisement that *Radio Days* is a miraculous fantasy of imagination, drenched in the sense of wonder. A film about those of us who learned the universe is filled with magic through the medium of voices drifting to us in the night. The days of radio listening, the days before television turned us into wombats who will tolerate the cacophony of John Madden's voice, the empty Barbieism of Vanna White, the sleaze of telemogrified Judith Krantz potboilers; the days of adventure and suspense and drama that we conjured in our own minds, without recourse to the production budgets of businessmen in charge of an art-form; the days of The Green Hornet and Jack Armstrong and Buck Rogers and Sam Spade; the days when listening to the radio was an integral part of one's education, rather then an induced zombieism, an interruption of life, sitting goggle-eyed before that box that permits of no imaginative participation from the the drowsing dreamer.

Radio Days, a kind of cockeyed and utterly dear variation on the multiple-plot-thread structure Buñuel pioneered in *The Phantom of Liberty* (what Leonard Maltin calls "a dream-like comedy of irony, composed of surreal, randomly connected anecdotes"); it is narrated by Woody, word-painting a portrait of life in America in the early Forties, when one's imagination could encompass a wealthy playboy whose alter ego could cloud men's minds so they could not see him, a temple of vampires through which a Jack, Doc and Reggie would wander in constant jeopardy, and a "Masked Avenger" whom we did not need to see in the flesh of Wallace Shawn to understand the nature of Good and Evil. In *Radio Days* — absolutely dripping with scenes that could make a paving stone roar with laughter — Woody Allen has created a fantasy structure of affection and memory that no one over the age of forty dare miss at peril of forgetting how wonderful was that time of youth, a film that no one *under* the age of forty dare miss at peril of being misled into accepting the squalor of television as the best of all possible mediums.

I have told you nothing much of the plot. That's not my job. I wouldn't steal an instant of *Radio Days* from

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your joy of discovery. But in the name of unalloyed nobility I beg you to do yourself a favor . . . go see it. Don't wait for the cassette . . . go see it. See it today, this very evening, and then go see it next week, to prove to yourself that the rush you got was not an aberration.

And send a get-well card to Woody. Tell him Harlan sent you.

Woody, that brave little beast (as Moorcock once called your humble columnist), was the fauna (or is it faun*um*?) (what the hell *is* the singular of fauna?) (who the hell am I?) (it only hurts when I screw the electrodes too tightly, doctor) who saved all of us from the cockroaches, but to buttress my new faith in the human race you also have to thank the flora called Audrey. A bloodsucking, flesh-nibbling, badass-talking, monomaniacal plant that dominates the spectacularly enjoyable LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS (Warner Brothers.).

I, like you, enjoyed the old Roger Corman film of 1960; I, like you, applauded the 1982 off-Broadway musical version; but neither predisposition to be charmed provided one one-millionth of the pleasure I derived from this film. Ellen Greene, Rick Moranis, Vincent Gardenia and a Greek Chorus of (Supremes-) *manquês* simply wow the spats off you. And one may now add to the W.C. Fields list of those with whom a smart actor should never work — dogs and children — talking plants. Because as sublimely cavorting as the people are, Audrey damned near steals the film. Howard Ashman's screenplay adds an almost believable sf rationale to the absolutely believable fantasy of it all, and gives Audrey a *raison d'être* for flytrap behavior that was absent in the Corman original; a conceit that enhances the story immeasurably.

Flora and fauna. Came they hence to save y'all from paying property taxes to the termites, tithes to the cockroaches, dues to the potato bugs. And I'm feeling so *up* about a human race that includes Woody Allen and Howard Ashman, if the bugs try to claim dominion I'm prepared to introduce them to Audrey.

ANCILLARY MATTERS: The follow-up essay on new technology of the Dr. Frankenstein style is in the works. Joe Dante is busy editing his new film, so we haven't had a chance yet to go do the Sam Spadework. Be patient. But until that time, let us stop referring to the depredations visited on *The Maltese Falcon*, et al., as "colorization." Colorization is the trademarked process and the name of the company that does the butchery. What it is, folks, is simply *coloring*. Apart from resisting the academese of what R. Mitchell calls "the educationists," we must not permit the coloring thugs to get us thinking their way at all. If we begin by using their heavy-breathing circumlocutions (like

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calling rebel insurgents "freedom fighters" and the napalming of villages as "Operation Sunshine"), then too soon we will not perceive that when Reagan's current mouthpiece says, "Yesterday's statements are inoperative," it is simply doublespeak for, "What he told you yesterday was a lie," and then, finally, they may be able to convince us that "colorization" is something nobler then parvenus with computer Crayolas. So eschew "colorization," good readers. Call it what it is, call it coloring. Call it *merde*.

Also in work is the long study of David Cronenberg's films. I've been busy writing a pilot film for NBC and Roger Corman, completing THE LAST DANGEROUS VISIONS, putting together a volume of film essays that include these columns, handing in THE HARLAN ELLISON HORNBOOK to Jack Chalker, who's been waiting more than ten years for it, and in general trying to clear away all my debts to people like Stuart Schiff, who has been patient to the point of beatification. So please don't *nubdz* me; when it gets written, it'll get written.

And finally, I must bring to your attention volume two of a work already noted in these columns.

Bill Warren, who knows more than any person in his or her right mind ought to know about American science fiction films of the fifties, gave us volume one of KEEP WATCHING THE SKIES! in 1982. He has now lost complete control of the beast, and volume two, at 839 pages with a price tag of $39.95, has escaped to terrorize a placid world and . . . *it's alive*!

If you missed volume one — a mere piddly 467 pages covering hundreds of films released between 1950 and 1957 — a staggering compendium of wise, witty, weird essays on everything from *Abbott and Costello Go to Mars* to *Zontar the Thing from Venus*, then fer pete's sake don't let volume two slip past you.

Yes, these books are pricey. (Of course, if you buy them separately they're $39.95 each, but if you buy the duo, it's only $65.00.) But, on my oath as a methane-breathing entity, this is a buck well spent. Warren doesn't merely give you the plot synopsis and the cast and the rest of the creative team, he doesn't merely put the film into historical and cinematic context, he doesn't merely describe the advertising and promotion and effect the film had on America as a whole or the sf world in part, he also lavishes each essay with bits of minutiae, arcane knowledge, bizarre connections and berserk influences, sidebar comments about the personal lives of the stars and writers and directors and producers. But on the plus side he does it with an absolutely charming affection for even the worst dog, the most inept pig, the lamest dromedary of a stinkeroo. Bill Warren really and truly *loves* this stuff, and his honest obsession cannot be resisted.

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Volume two covers 1958 through 1962, with appendixes that list full cast and credits, order of release of the films, announced (but not produced) titles, a bibliography, an addendum and an index to the more hundreds of movies that Bill has sat through from beginning to end so we don't have to.

These are the sort of books one keeps to hand in the bathroom. As those of you who read understand, that is high compliment indeed. The potty is the last private place for a reader in the world. No one bothers you. Unless you live in a large Italian family, which is another sociological can of worms entirely. But you can't be in there *too* long, or someone will think you're enjoying yourself in ways you're not supposed to, so you have to have reading material that can be enjoyed in medium-short bursts. *Time* is okay, and a book of Fredric Brown's short stories; comic books work well, and *The National Review* (because *no* one can read it for very long without throwing it across the toilet into the tub). Which is to say, KEEP WATCHING THE SKIES! is made up of delicious morsels that can be enjoyed over a long period of time. At peace, and with pleasure.

If your bookstore has trouble ordering them, suggest they contact McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers; Box 611; Jefferson, North Carolina 28640. Pony up the sixty-five bucks for the pair. I do not think you will hate me too much for this recommendation.

And tell 'em Woody sent you.

Coming soon

Next month: Two very different and exciting SF novelets: "Going to Meet the Alien" by Andrew Weiner and "The Verts Get A Nuke" by Michael Armstrong. Also, short stories by Barry Malzberg, Alan Dean Foster and John Morressy.

Soon: New stories from Ursula K. LeGuin, James Tiptree, Jr., Jim Aikin, Edward Bryant, Kate Wilhelm, Avram Davidson, John Kessel, Bradley Denton, Nancy Kress and many others.

The August issue is on sale June 30. Or send the coupon on page 56.

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Ron Goulart, who once created and wrote a syndicated comic strip, offers a new tale about a comic book artist who calls upon black magic to help himself out of a slump. Mr. Goulart's latest novel is DAREDEVILS, LTD., a Ben Jolson novel to be published by St. Martins.

Business As Usual

BY
RON GOULART

Multiple murder had nothing to do with it initially.

They were simply sitting in a booth in B. B. (Bagel Boy) Sankowitz's restaurant at the edge of Greenwich Village, and Ed Marconi was attempting, yet again, to talk sense to him.

"Take, for example, what you're doing right this minute," said the pudgy, thirty-seven-year old Marconi.

Lem Gaynor blinked, setting his bagel back on its cracked plate. "Merely having lunch."

"But it's four in the afternoon," his friend and sometime collaborator pointed out. "See, normal people have lunch, usually, in the vicinity of noon."

"I was doing something else at noon." Lem resumed eating the bagel. He was lean, brown-haired, and thirty-three.

"Penciling? Were you, dare I hope, penciling the nineteen-page *Kill Klan* story that was due up at Maximus Comics's lofty Park Avenue South offices Tuesday?"

"Isn't tomorrow Tuesday?"

"Not at all."

"Shit." He rested the bagel. "I never realized before that a broken heart could affect your brain. That's interesting, how my temporal sense has—"

"Lem, you broke up with Narda seven and one half months ago. You have to—"

"Broke up? Is that how you define breaking up? Throws a wok full of purple cabbage at me, kicks me in the slats, and shoves me down a flight of uncarpeted stairs. Is that how they define breaking up over at *Manhattan Business Weekly*?"

"Don't, please, mention what I do in real life. It depresses me."

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"Sorry. This massive depression I'm suffering from has—"

"Look, old buddy, my only hope for salvation is getting more free-lance scripting work from Maximus. But I can't do the finished scripts on *The Kill Klan* nor *Warbride, Queen of the Barbarians* until you turn in the penciled pages. Because of the backward way they insist on—"

"I'll have the *Klan* job done by tomorrow," promised Lem. "What is tomorrow?'

"Friday."

"Shit. Friday's that post office auction over in—"

No, nope." Reaching across the booth table, Marconi caught his friend's arm. "You have to stop wandering around. What you must do is sit at the drawing board until—"

Life's no fun if you don't savor all its many—"

"All you've been doing of late is haunting auctions, rummage sales, other equally half-witted—"

"That's what artists do, especially heartbroken ones. They soak up impressions of life as it's—"

"Let me be honest with you." Marconi rested both elbows on the table. "Narda is sort of attractive in her way, but she weighs only about one hundred pounds. To get this upset over so small a—"

"One hundred and three. She's slender, not skinny." He took another bite from his bagel. "Actually, Ed, now that you bring it up — all your wives were on the hefty side. So you're not the best judge of what constitutes slender. They all had the same first name, as I recall, which is strange and odd."

"Only two did."

"Well, even two Melissas strikes me as bizarre."

"Let's get back to the point. Unless you shape up and start meeting deadlines better, Maximus Comics, Inc., is going to give Narda Vargas both *Kill Klan* and *Warbride* to draw, plus the upcoming *Kill Klan* graphic novel. And if that happens, old buddy, both our incomes'll suffer. Because Narda loathes me, as a side effect of loathing you, and she'll never allow me to keep scripting the books."

Lem sighed. "I taught that woman all the tricks of the trade while we were living together." He leaned back against the pale green wall of the booth. "All she knew how to draw was fuzzy little kittens with googly eyes when I met her, just twenty-three and fresh from Muncie, Indiana. Now she actually claims to be a better barbarian artist than I am, and she's got Carlotsky and the rest of the Maximus editors near to convinced. Boy, how people can change in just four years."

"You can hold on to your books if you just get back on schedule, Lem."

He glanced out at the misty afternoon street. A young woman with a pink crew cut was walking by. "The trouble is," Lem admitted, "I'm still in a real slump."

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"Don't I know that?"

"I ought to hire an assistant. Somebody to come in and help me catch up."

"Who?"

"Yeah, who? Most of the good guys are tied up elsewhere or starting to get assignments on their own." He slouched. "Boy, if only Jock Speeler were still alive. He was an old-timer — worked for All American, Inc., back in the fifties — but he kept up. The guy was fast, too. And he could ape any style, even mine. Pencil five pages a day, make it look like Adams, Kirby, Byrne. If only I had Jock to help out, I could work wonders."

From somewhere within the kitchen came a sudden, unearthly scream.

Frowning, Marconi turned toward the swinging door. "Accident?"

Next came a different, equally unearthly scream.

"Could be," suggested Lem, "a grease fire."

Sankowitz, clad in his usual outfit of overcoat and chef hat, emerged. "What's your opinion, I'd like to know?"

"Of what?"

"Gomez and I are having a contest," explained the proprietor, "to see who can do the best Tarzan yell. So?"

"The first was better," said Lem. "Although neither was that terrific."

"I admire your honesty," said Sankowitz. "Too bad, though. If you'd have nominated number two as the winner it would've meant a free Dr. Brown's soda for you and your crony. But such is life." He returned to his kitchen.

Ignoring the subsequent screams, Marconi said, "How desperate are you?

"To get Narda back? I have mixed feelings, actually, because while I miss her, I feel she trampled on—"

"Forget that skinny bimbo. I'm talking about your career."

"It's all I have left."

Marconi hunched and lowered his voice. "Suppose we could avail ourselves of Jock Speeler's services? Could you really get yourself back on—"

"Whoa now, that poor bastard's dead and gone. Run over by a furrier's truck out in Queens three years ago."

After looking carefully around the sparsely tenanted restaurant, Marconi continued, "Would you go so far as to try . . . magic?"

Lem frowned. "Has the stress of paying alimony to three fat ladies named Melissa affected your—"

"Two fat ladies named Melissa," corrected his collaborator. "And they're fat only if you take Narda as a standard. Listen, I think there's maybe a way we can use Speeler to get you out of this slump."

"He was a genius, one of the fastest hacks in comics," said Lem. "Thing is, they buried him out—"

"I know; we were at the funeral."

"You were. I meant to go, but

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there was a church tag sale about six blocks from—"

"There's a way to get Jock Speeler to assist you."

"Highly unlikely."

Marconi scanned the room once more. "We'd have to use . . . well, more or less black magic," he said. "I haven't brought it up before, but things keep getting worse, and I really think Carlotsky's going to take *Warbride* away from you soon unless you get with it. So — let me see if I can get us an appointment with Mrs. Glendenny."

"Hold it now. Mrs. Glendenny? I've seen her idiotic ads in the *Voice*. She's just a palmist or something. Operates out of seedy storefront here in the Village. She can't possibly—"

"The woman is legitimate; the palmistry stuff is just a cover," Marconi assured him. "Before I took over as Potato News editor for the weekly, I did a free-lance piece on magic for *The National Intruder*. She's a genuine sorceress, who can summon up—"

"The *Intruder* isn't the sort of publication that instills blind faith in me," Lem told him. "I doubt I want to mess with—"

"O.K., so what do you do instead? Reform?"

Lem tapped the fingers of his left hand on the tabletop. "Suppose it wouldn't hurt to chat with the old dear," he said. "How exactly does. . . . Wait!"

Someone had sneezed, subtly, in the next booth.

Hopping up on his seat, Lem peered over the partition. "Ha!"

The slim, dark-haired young woman in the next booth gazed up at him and gave him a brief left-handed smile. "You're just the sort to leap up and exclaim, 'Ha!' in a public place."

"How long have you been lurking there, Narda?"

"Just this moment sat down." She gave him a guileless look, brushing at her pretty nose with her forefinger. "If you're through gawking at me, I'd like to order my dinner."

He took a slow breath in, then exhaled slowly. "Nice seeing you again."

"Have a nice day."

Dropping back into his seat, he said quietly, "Set up an appointment with Mrs. Glendenny. I'm not going to let Narda beat me."

It isn't exactly what I was expecting," complained Lem, shifting in the wicker chair.

"But this seems to be the way she works, old buddy."

Across the lopsided table from them, a large woman sat in a dark, heavy chair. Her hair was an electric white in the pale purplish light of the small back room, and a fringed shawl covered her broad shoulders.

"But you gave me the impression she'd summon up Jock Speeler's ghost

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so I could put it to work at a drawing board."

"Well, that is pretty much what you'll be doing," said Marconi, watching not the mystic Mrs. Glendenny but the presumably stuffed lizard that sat on a shadowy shelf to her left.

"Oh, so? Having his spirit actually inhabit my body isn't quite like having a sort of transparent assistant to—"

"You'll be in control," pointed out the writer. "You get to tap in on all his abilities, his speed and so on. Think of it as like adding super unleaded gasoline to your car's—"

"I haven't owned a car since I moved here from—"

"I don't have one either, but the analogy still holds good." Marconi was watching an owl who sat on a dusty bookcase. "It's also like, you know, athletes getting a booster before a big event."

"And getting disqualified."

"She promised you she can exorcise Jock anytime you want. So what can you lose?"

"I know all about the perils and dangers of demonic possession. I drew *Tales of Screaming Terror Comics* for two years before I took over—"

"That was fancy and this is real life."

"Even so—"

"Real life where Narda's going to be put on as regular *Warbride* artist if you don't—"

"O.K., all right. We'll do it."

"Mrs. Glendenny," said Marconi, not looking directly at the plump sorceress. "He's ready."

She produced a blurred snoring noise.

"Ma'am," said Lem, knocking on the table. "I'm, pretty much, set to start this."

She jerked, sat up, stared at him. "Let us proceed then, young man, to penetrate the mysterious veil that separates the world of the living from that of the dead." She wiped her mouth with the back of one freckled hand. "That's a hundred bucks up front."

"I don't suppose you take Visa or . . . never mind." He eased his wallet out of his hip pocket and extracted five twenties. That left him with nineteen dollars. "Is there some magical gesture I have to make with this?"

"Drop it in my mitt."

He did that. "This whole business won't hurt much, will it?"

"No worse than a visit to the dentist." She reached beneath the table. "Give me the name of this gent again, O.K.?"

"Speeler," provided Marconi, hunching in his chair. "Jock Speeler."

"He was some kind of artist?"

"Cartoonist, comic book artist."

"Cartoonist, right." She placed a copper flask atop the dark velvety tablecloth. "A drink of this magical elixir will get us going."

Lem reached for the jug. "What exactly is—"

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"You don't drink it, sweetie; I do." She slapped his hand away.

"Excuse me. I'm not used to black magic rituals."

After a long swig, she wiped her mouth again. "Did you pay me yet?"

"Just now."

She rubbed her hands together. "We'll now contact this . . . Spiegel, is it?"

"Speeler."

"He'll soon be here with us," she promised. "Dwelling within the body of this personable young man."

He usually didn't wake up here.

Lem blinked and yawned. Pushed back from his drawing board. He noticed he was fully clothed, that the midday sun was bright outside the tiny window of his narrow studio, and that he'd apparently penciled several pages of *Kill Klan* while asleep.

He studied the page he'd been at work on when he returned to himself.

The drawing was more or less in his style; the compositions were O.K. But there were several pigs in one of the panels; an outhouse loomed in another.

He grabbed Marconi's story synopsis off his taboret. "No pigs, no privy," he said aloud, confirming his original impression of the story.

Clearing his throat, he raised his voice and said, "Can you hear me in there, Jock? Don't think I don't appreciate your help, and your getting up even before I did to tackle this job. Thing is, I could do with a little less clowning around. O.K.?"

Taking up his electric eraser, he started to get rid of the pigs.

He'd just about finished cleaning up the page, when his door buzzer rasped.

Lem left his drawing board; stepped over a sprawl of comic books; made his way along the thin, dark hall; and flicked the talk switch. "Who's there?"

"I still don't much like you."

"Narda?"

"And I don't want to come up to the apartment," came her distinctive voice. "Fact is, I wouldn't be found dead in your squalid quarters."

"Hey, are you down there in the foyer shouting insults and snide remarks so that any of the other tenants who pass will hear the—"

"I dropped by only to warn you."

"Save yourself the trouble. I'm not going to get dumped off *Warbride* nor *Kill Klan*. So you better hope Carlotsky revives *Tizzie the Typist,* or otherwise you won't have a damn thing to draw."

"I followed you and your oaf friend last night."

"Ed's no oaf," he said into the speaker. "Sure, he does tend to marry fat girls, but that. . . . Wait now. Followed us where?"

"To that hellhole just off Bleeker."

"Mrs. Glendenny happens to be a highly respected palmist with a gift for—"

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"She's a witch. A real, certified witch," said Narda from down below. "She's an awful drunk besides, so you're likely to get into even worse trouble than you would if you messed around with only a regular witch."

"The fact that I consult a palmist is no business of—"

"Oh, the heck with you. I warned you and that's it," Narda said. "I happen to know a lot more about that awful woman than you do. But you're running true to form and being dumb."

The hole in the wall ceased speaking to him.

After shrugging one shoulder. Lem headed slowly back to his board. Tacked to the edge of it was a slip of paper he hadn't seen before. Although it was in his handwriting, he had no recollection of having written it.

The memo said, "All the swine have to die!"

It rained the following Monday. When Marconi came into the bleak Chinese restaurant, his tweedy sport coat started to give off wisps of steam.

The writer halted just inside the door, rubbing raindrops from his glasses with the wrinkled tip of his paisley tie.

Spotting Lem, he crossed over to the dim-lit table at the far end of the room. "Why did you pick this place to—"

"Because I'm unknown here." He had both hands clutched around a tiny cup of tepid tea.

Lowering himself into a spindly chair, Marconi inquired, "What's that under your eye?"

"A bodily injury."

"Then. . . ." He coughed into his hand. "I was up at Maximus right after lunch to see if I could pick up your penciled artwork and do my finished script. Carlotsky was mentioning that. . . . Why'd you take off your pants?"

"I didn't."

"But six other people up there swear you were found in the supply room, unclad from the waist down." Marconi rubbed one damp sleeve. "Did I get the story right? You were discovered in there with a visiting lady teacher from the Midwest."

Lem forlornly held up two fingers. "Two teachers. Part of the seventeen members of the Rural High School Art Teachers Association who were taking a guided tour of Maximus Comics, Inc., in order to see firsthand how comic books are produced so that they can return to their hometowns after their Manhattan conference is over and share the information with their eager pupils."

"Has brooding over Narda caused you to attack random females? I understand one of the teachers was on the plump side."

"It wasn't me," repeated Lem. "It only looked that way. Actually, it was Jock Speeler."

"Couldn't be."

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"Do you think I'm going goofy, then?" asked Lem, gesturing with the teacup. "This damn ghost you had that old skwack insert in me is lecherous and lewd. Did they tell you what I did in the elevator?"

"Coming up or going down?"

Sighing, Lem said, "The upward journey was worse. I made salty remarks to a Salvation Army girl who was coming up to collect a bundle of *Flaming Death Comics* to distribute to poor and destitute waifs. Then I fondled Ruth at the switchboard when I left the elevator."

"You never particularly liked her."

"I never particularly cared for Salvation Army lasses either," he pointed out. "I'm trying to convey to you the notion that Jock Speeler is taking me over. Not all the time, but ever more frequently. Especially when there are ladies present."

"But Jock was a very shy man." Marconi wiped his glasses again. "Widowed, churchgoing. He never fooled around or—"

"He regrets it now that I'm housing his spirit. This time around he's determined to make up for what he missed." He took a nervous sip of his tea. "We've got to go back to Mrs. Glendenny. She has to get rid of Jock before he forces me to do something even more—"

"Is that smart, though? After all, you did finish up the *Kill Klan* story in just a few days."

"There's another thing that's bothering me. He draws pigs."

"Pigs?"

"Jock draws pigs on almost all my pages. I can't control it. And outhouses."

"Oh, so he's responsible for the pigs."

"I erased them all. How did you—"

"You missed one on page seven. In the panel where Professor Zanzibar is explaining transmission to Deathwind and his sister," said Marconi. "I've been trying to figure out who he was, and what he might say."

"So what I have lodged in me is a ghost who's horny as a hoot owl and obsessed with scribbling pigs and privies."

His collaborator frowned. "That pig," he said thoughtfully.

"I'll erase it."

"No. I mean there was something familiar about it."

"Jock could imitate any style, so—"

"It reminded me of something, but I can't place it." He shook his head. "Let's get to something else important. Carlotsky told me he'll hush up the teacher business. But he says you have to promise not to behave that way at the Comic Book Artists of America awards banquet on Friday."

"Hell, I don't even want to go. I intend to lash myself to the board and—"

"But you're up for an award yourself."

"You accept for me."

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"C'mon. Narda's sure to be there," reminded the writer. "Think of how it'll annoy her if you win. You don't want to miss that."

Lem said, "If I win it, I could make a little speech about how I'm looking forward to drawing *Kill Klan* and *Warbride* for years and years to come."

"Exactly. Carlotsky wouldn't be able to dump you," Marconi said. "Unless you keep missing deadlines."

"O.K, but we still have to consult Mrs. Glendenny," Lem said. "She's got to come up with a spell for controlling Jock Speeler a little better."

Lem tumbled into his armchair. "Why would a witch go to Bermuda?"

"The same reason anyone would." Marconi wandered around the small living room of the apartment.

"Three weeks in Bermuda. She must be doing pretty well in the sorcery business."

"What you have to do is keep from giving in to despair." Marconi settled on the narrow sofa.

"I'll look on the bright side, right. What is the bright side, by the way?"

"You've got the spirit of a great hack artist sharing your body at the moment. That's helping you a lot, by linking his talent and speed to yours. You've been catching up on deadlines, and within a few weeks — by the time Mrs. Glendenny comes back from Bermuda all tanned and relaxed — you'll be way ahead. Then we can get her to exorcise Jock."

"By then I'll be locked away in the State home for the Incurably Horny. They'll net me, assuming that I'm responsible for all the lewd things I seem to be doing."

"It's not going to be easy," agreed his friend. "But you ought to be able, by asserting your will, to control Jock."

"But he's getting stronger. Maybe I won't be able to—"

"Sure you will," Marconi assured him. "You have to take as your motto the phrase we see on signs all across this great city. 'Business as usual during alterations.' "

"Shit," observed Lem.

"Adversity can be a great. . . . What's this?" He picked up a memo from the lopsided coffee table.

"He writes those. Usually while I'm dozing or—"

"'These are the swine who must die — Marsha Betterman, Henry Weiner, William F. Kneehaus.'" Marconi frowned, tapping the slip of paper on his knee. "These people are all executives at the Exceptional Features Syndicate."

"Same syndicate that releases Maximus's *Flaming Death* comic strip." Lem nodded. "I recognized the names myself, though I can't figure what Jock has against them. Far as I know, he never worked for. . . . Hey, why are you gasping and turning pale like that?" He hopped free of the chair.

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"Are you having—"

"Oy." Marconi waved him away. "Oy."

"So you said. What's wrong?"

"The pigs."

"Don't worry. I explained you don't have to write dialogue for—"

"Outhouses," said his collaborator. "Calls people swine. Mad at Exceptional Features." He sank back, arms dangling.

Lem watched him for a silent moment. "Wait now," he said. "You're not suggesting. . . . You assured me that venerable old broad was a crackerjack mystic."

"Well, she seems to have developed a drinking problem since I met her last. I wasn't going to mention—"

"You're not suggesting that kindly old Mrs. Glendenny summoned up the wrong spirit?" Lem stood, swayed a little. "That it isn't steady, dependable Jock Speeler who dwells, even as we speak, right here inside my body?"

"As a matter of fact, old buddy, I am going to suggest just that."

"Pigs and outhouses," said Lem, eyes widening. "Chasing after all and sundry women. Sure, I should've realized. You and your drunken witch have stuck me with the ghost of Lloyd Bangs. Lloyd Bangs, world-renowned comic strip artist and creator of *Slippery Elmer*, the satirical hillbilly strip that ran in hundreds of newspapers across the country. A strip that began to slip badly as Bangs grew more and more grouchy and conservative in his old age. Finally the syndicate — in fact, the three people on that swine list — moved to take *Slippery Elmer* away from him. Since they owned it outright, they could do that. Yeah, and Bangs jumped out of his townhouse window as a result. That was three years ago, just a couple miles from here, over on Gramercy Park."

"You can sure see how Mrs. Glendenny could've made a mistake," said Marconi. "Especially since Bangs died so close to here and Jock expired way out in Queens. What I mean is, summoning up spirits is a tricky business, and she just got the wrong cartoonist."

"We'll have to fly to Bermuda."

"But we can't do that," his friend told him. "Carlotsky won't let you miss another deadline. You've got to have another seventeen pages of *Warbride* done by Monday. Otherwise he'll call in Narda."

Lem sat again. "You're right. I better stay here and draw."

"Be positive," urged Marconi. "You can control the spirit of Lloyd Bangs. Show him who's in charge around here. And then get those darn pages out."

"Business as usual," said Lem.

The elevators in the Hotel Waterloo rise slowly and rattle a lot. At a few minutes past eight on Friday evening, Lem awakened to find himself ascending in one of them, wearing his second best suit.

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He was alone in the rattling, silver-walled cage.

"Jesus, what's the last thing I remember?" he asked himself.

A pastrami sandwich.

"That was lunch, then. So I seem to have been in a trance since five this afternoon."

What had he been doing since then?

"Putting on a suit. But what else?"

Just as the elevator halted on the thirteenth floor, he said aloud, "Bangs, what've you been doing with my body?"

The door wheezed open, and, reluctantly, Lem stepped out into a maroon-colored foyer.

Welcome Comic Book Artists of America! was hand-lettered on a paper banner over the doorway to a vast room labeled *Wellington Ballroom.*

Lem found himself striding briskly into the ballroom. There were forty white-covered tables in there, each occupied by from six to eight artists and friends. Up on the dais an editor from Maximus was saying, "While we're waiting for our next course, I'd like to announce the winner for Best Superhero Inker. The nominees. . . ."

Ignoring the several tables of Maximus staffers, including the one where Marconi was signaling to him, Lem walked up toward the front of the pale pink ballroom to sit at a table occupied by the staff of the independent *Funny Bunny Comics.*

"You're at the wrong table," whispered the round-faced young man next to him.

"Mind your own business, you fat swine," Lem heard himself saying in a faintly Bostonian accent.

"It's just that—"

"Hush," suggested the editor of *Funny Bunny*, scowling across at both of them.

Perspiring, Lem slumped in his chair. He glanced around and suddenly felt quite chilled. The table next to his was filled with Exceptional Features people, including Marsha Betterman, Henry Weiner, and William F. Kneehaus, the three syndicate executives Bangs blamed for driving him to suicide.

Lem unbuttoned his suit coat so that he could reach into his trouser pocket for a tissue. The right side of his jacket swung far out and thunked the chair of the round-faced young man.

"Hush," repeated the angry editor.

Very slowly, Lem inserted a hand in his coat pocket. "Shit," he exclaimed. Then tried a disarming grin on the frowning editor and the others around the table. "Sorry. Merely thinking aloud."

What he'd found in the pocket of the jacket of his second best suit was a gun.

He wasn't certain what kind of gun. Most likely, from the feel of it, a .38 revolver. Lem had learned something about guns and other weapons

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during the three years he drew *Sgt. Blood and His Killcrazed Comrades Comics.*

"What the hell am I doing with a .38 revolver?"

You're going to kill three swine.

"No, I'm not," he blurted. "Sorry again, folks. Under a lot of stress. Deadlines. You know how that is."

"*Funny Bunny* is a quarterly," explained the round-faced young man, "so we don't actually have all that much—"

"Hush!"

Lem decided he'd best leave the room.

He couldn't get up.

I should have killed them instead of myself. That was my major mistake.

"And too late to rectify," Lem told the voice of Lloyd Bangs that was sounding inside his head. "Excuse me again, folks. Find myself reciting some comic book dialogue I just lettered this afternoon."

Less clowning and swinish behavior. Sit quietly until I'm ready to slaughter those three.

"Like hell." He made a great effort to rise.

He managed to push his chair back about six inches, but remained seated.

Lem gritted his teeth, made a terrific twisting movement, and tried to get to his feet.

Instead, he and the chair both toppled over backward.

"Hush."

"Listen, we're a bit beyond decorum here." He threw himself free of the fallen chair.

Lem went crawling along the thick carpeting, then wrenched himself upright.

On his feet again, he went running from the ballroom and into the foyer.

Noticing a phone booth, he dived inside and yanked the jointed door shut.

He was breathing through his mouth and could hear the rapid beat of his heart.

You're being a swine, Lem.

"I'm not going to kill anybody for you, Bangs."

I won't argue with you. Take out that gun.

"Nope."

I must insist.

Lem's right hand was walking down his chest toward the pocket holding the gun.

It'll take only a moment. Then my troubled spirit can—

"Sit still, Lem, and don't do anything to futz this up." The booth door was jerked open, and there was Narda Vargas. She was wearing a simple black cocktail dress and a strand of pearls. From out of her black purse, she was taking a baby bottle.

"You're looking very pretty."

"Be quiet, O.K.?" There were several holes poked in the nipple. The dark-haired artist commenced sprin-

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kling him with the contents of the plastic bottle.

"What exactly are you—"

"If you had any sense, you'd have tried some of this yourself. It's holy water."

Don't let her do it.

"I got it and the rest of this stuff from some friends of mine in the Village." Dropping the bottle back away, Narda took out a small packet of glittering yellow powder. The powder crackled and flashed as she dusted him with it. "People who're a heck of a lot more powerful than your Mrs. Glendenny."

"This is very thoughtful of—"

"Be quiet." She rested her purse on his lap, fishing out a large sheet of foolscap. "I've been following you around, you nitwit, and I found out what a ridiculous mess you've gotten yourself into."

"Is that a spell?"

"It sure is. To exorcise this dumb ghost out of you. Be silent while I read it. It's in Latin and Hungarian."

After running her tongue over her upper lip, Narda recited the exorcising spell.

Stop her. She'll. . . .

Lem experienced a sudden, pervasive pain. Like a severe case of heartburn that'd spread throughout his entire body. He became dizzy and tipped over against the booth wall.

Folding up the spell, Narda returned it to her purse and retrieved the purse off his sprinkled knees. "Try and stay out of trouble for a while."

A bit weakly, Lem caught her free hand. "I really appreciate this," he told her. "And it cheers me up."

"Being saved from demonic possession'll cheer anybody up."

"That does, sure. But what I meant was, this proves you still care for me. Only love would compel you to risk the—"

"Pay attention now," the dark-haired young woman told him. "I still detest you, Lem. I intend, however, to take both ***Warbride*** and ***Kill Klan*** away from you. I'm a better and more dependable artist than you'll ever be, and I'll win out eventually. But it's more important to me to win fair and square. I want to beat you when you're at the top of your form and not in the grip of a vengeful spirit." She took a careful step back from him. "Love and affection had absolutely nothing to do with it."

"Oh," he said.

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This new story by Barbara Owens is about one of the oddest post-holocaust societies we've ever come across, a huge circle of the remnants of civilization called. . .

Chain

BY
BARBARA OWENS

Sometimes the air is kind. Warm. Chain talks. No one dies. Later, when we are allowed to rest and eat, we speak of how gladdened we are for the good, warm air.

At other times, when the air squeezes itself and empties on us, chain is silent. We stand, heads down as the water comes, and we think of the time when we will be replaced, when we can go to the fire, dry our selves, and eat hot food. Some, usually the olders, get sickness each time the water falls. They always die.

The hardest times to be chained are when evil walks — the white time, when the air breaks and falls in small, cold pieces like feathers, piling high against us as we stand. Many die during the white time. This is why females of our herd never stop making little ones; Society has ordered that there always be replacements for the dead ones when they fall.

I have experienced few white times on chain; I am younger. I became chain when my self grew tall enough for my head to touch the so high board in the Rounder shed. Before that time we are all little ones tended by the mamas, females who do not provide little ones and so are not fit to be chain. They cook and watch the little ones; it is lowly duty. I was proud to become chain. It means I am a man, allowed to help the females make little ones and to take my place as keeper of the beast.

Other herds have different duties. Some bring us food and skins to wear; others bring wood for our fires. Chain cannot do these things. It is so important to stay strong for chain that we are never allowed to leave our camp during the time we are alive.

The Rounders are a large herd, al-

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though not so large as chain. It is their responsibilty to ride horses around and around the circle of chain, making certain it never breaks, that the beast cannot escape. They punish violators, often to the point of death. But few violate the rules. We have been told by our rulers, Society, of the dangers of the beast. We know the importance of our duty. Our lives are spent protecting our world from the beast, standing through the light times and the dark, holding fast to one another's hands.

Those hands must never be loosed for an instant. Once I watched a female bear a little one on chain. She cried out to be replaced, but the Rounders would not permit it, so she bore it standing in her place on chain. A mama came and carried it away. Chain is proud to be so strong. We stand in place during most of our lives, and we seldom fall. We are stronger than Rounders. They sleep in sheds made of wood; chain survives in bushes or shelters made from skins.

We have been told that many herds like ours make up chain. When I was still a little one, another of my size disobeyed Society and left camp. He wanted to see how large chain was. Many light and dark times passed before he returned. Before the Rounders killed him, he told of the many fields and hills he walked without finding the end of chain. It is good to think of that, of how many and how strong we are, and how we have kept the beast inside chain for longer than anyone knows.

Olders tell stories passed from their olders of how the beast came among us many times ago. They say he is not of our world. Some stories tell of those who saw him — a terrible creature, higher than a tree. They speak of his fearful sounds, and of powers so filled with evil that Society founded itself to protect the world from him. They formed chain, and it has never broken. We keep the beast contained.

At certain times a member of Society comes to our camp. He walks short steps inside chain and speaks the words that make the beast afraid. He finishes by breaking a large stick and leaving the pieces for the beast to see. Chain is gladdened then, for it has been explained to us that this shows the beast what will become of him should he try to escape. Chain stands especially proud and strong during the stick-breaking times.

When I was a little one, waiting to be chain, I sometimes thought of the beast and how it might be to view him. It brought me fear, but I thought it would also gladden me to have a story; I could tell the little ones that I had witnessed the beast. I did not think of this happening. None of our camp had ever viewed him, but still I thought of it, and I could not put the thought away. Once I became chain, of course, I set such things aside.

We are told of a hollow gourd in

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the Rounder shed. As each new light time comes, a small rock is placed inside this gourd. When the rocks rise to the top, it is time to feed the beast. The mamas fill a large skin with fruits, nuts, bits of meat, and sweet grass, and it is carried inside chain, up the hillside to a certain flat rock and left there. An older is usually chosen to do this; olders are of less value than youngers should they not return.

Feeding the beast is a custom started within our olders' memory, begun by Society when stories told of the beast creeping along chain in the dark time and carrying away pieces to eat. Since chain started feeding the beast, this has not happened.

During the last dying time, when tree leaves turned blood color and fell to the ground, rocks filled the gourd. A female older was sent to the beast's feeding place. She was a small older, and the skin was heavy with food. When she was only small steps inside chain, she stopped suddenly, making choking sounds. She hammered feebly at her chest and fell dead; the skin spilled into the long grass.

Chain stood silent. Such a thing had never happened before. The Rounder cried, "The beast must be fed! If he does not eat, he will come to us in the dark!"

I stood nearest to him on chain. His stick struck me on the head. "You! Pick up the skin and carry it. Run!"

Another blow sent me sprawling forward, my hands torn from their grip. A hiss of fear sounded — chain was broken! But a replacement was dragged into my place, and I jumped to my feet. For the only time in my memory, I was inside chain.

I did not stop to think of this. The Rounder was throwing rocks to speed me, so I flung my self upon the fallen skin, pulling its scattered contents back inside. Some things had lodged beneath the older; I kicked her aside to retrieve them, and a rock struck me solidly on the shoulder, but I did not show pain. I ran — toward the hillside where the beast's feeding place lay.

My legs tired quickly. I had not run since I was a little one; my legs were used to standing still in a single place. They began to pain me, but I could not rest — I ran, the heavy skin swinging upon my back, and I did not slow until I was on the hillside among the trees.

Fear lived strong in me. I wanted to finish this duty quickly and return to the safety of chain. If the dark time came while I was inside, the beast would surely catch and eat me. Fear gave my legs the power to run fast, faster — up, high onto the hillside, until I was in an open place where a large, flat rock lay on the ground. Although I had never seen it, I knew it was the feeding place of the beast.

I stopped, leaning against a tree, my breath coming loud in the stillness. I must hurry. I threw the skin

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upon the stone, turning to follow my steps back down the hillside, and something was there, standing in the place where I must run.

I had heard no sound, but it was there, high in the air, wider than my arms reach. I could not run — fear held me in my place. He would eat me. I would not be chain again. I told my self I would be brave.

To look upon the beast was even more terrible than I had thought. Thick fur grew on him — on his head, his face, his arms and legs, even the open places of the skins he wore. His eyes stretched wide in his head. Evil eyes, the color of the slick mud in our camp. He did not have long claws as the stories say, but hands like a man, yet so large they would cover my whole head. I could not see his mouth in the fur, but I thought of strong tearing teeth, and I could not stop the trembling that began in me. He looked down on me from his place in the high air. When he moved, I could not stop myself — I made a small, lowly sound.

The trees shook from a sudden terrible sound. It came from the beast — a voice sound, but more fearful than anything I had heard before. When he spoke, my ears pained.

"Well, look here. A little thing that squeaks."

I bowed my head before him, prepared to be eaten. The ground shivered as he came toward me. He carried a danger scent. His hands closed around me, and I was lifted — up, up toward the terrible teeth. I could only kick feebly and make small sounds. When my face was close to his, he held me, looking at me with his awful eyes. I could do nothing but hang there, helpless, waiting for my time to die.

His voice came again, louder, like the angry sound the air makes when water falls and light flashes through our world.

"I haven't had a close look at one of you for a long time. God, you just keep getting uglier. Look at you! You got skin the color of paste. Not a hair on you, not even eyelashes. How tall are you — three feet?" He shook me, making an animal sound. My heart weakened within me. "So this is all that's left."

He released me, and I fell to the ground in a heap, shivering. Would he make a fire to cook me first? Instinct told me to run, but I could not. I lay on the ground, waiting to see what he would do.

For a time he just looked down on me. Then he moved his big head back and forth and sat beside me on the ground. Even sitting, he was as high as my whole self standing. I drew up tight. Now he would raise me to those terrible teeth.

"Well, who are you, baldy? I see you brought me food." My voice would not make sound. "You hear me? What's your name?"

The roar of him shook my words

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free. "I — I am chain. I come to feed the beast."

"Yeah, I see that. I asked you what's your name?"

I did not understand what he asked. I was thinking it would gladden me if the pain ended quickly.

"What are you called?"

"I am chain."

Again he made the sound of angry air. "Dammit, I *know* you belong to that string of paper dolls down there. But what are *you* called? Your name, dummy, what is it?"

I could not answer him because I did not know what he wanted my words to say. I made small sounds again.

He leaned his big head close to mine. "You don't have one, do you? You honest to God don't have a name." I said nothing. After a time he leaned his head back and made the terrible sound again. I covered my head with my arms. "Can you believe it? It's come to that. They don't even have names anymore."

He touched my shoulder. "What're you shaking for? You think I'm going to eat you?"

I cried out sharply. He took his hand away. "I'll be damned. You do. Look, I won't hurt you. You don't have to be afraid, understand?" Still I said nothing. He moved his head back and forth again. "It's like we're not speaking the same language."

He leaned his back against a tree and looked at me some more. I had not understood most of his words, but my thoughts told me they concerned not eating me. I wanted to believe this was so.

"Let's try again," he said after a time. "How about we just talk awhile. I'm a little crazy, but don't let it bother you. You'd be crazy, too, if you were I. Today I'm feeling lonesome. We'll just sit here like two old buddies and talk. Want something to eat?"

He took nuts from the skin and crushed them with his big hands. When he held them out to me, I leaned away.

"O.K.," he said. "I don't mind having them to myself." I shivered when I heard his teeth chewing the food. "Now, lately I've been avoiding you folks down there. What's been happening? Tell me about yourself. What do you do when you're not holding hands?"

I tried to think what he wanted. Talk. I would do as ordered.

"I am chain," I said.

"So you told me. But what about when you're not chain?"

I did not understand. "My herd is chain. We protect our world from the—the—" I stopped.

His head leaned toward me. "Your what? Did you say herd?"

"Yes. My herd is chain."

"Good God, man, herds are for animals, not people!" He was angered again. My words had not pleased him. Trembling began in me once more.

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"You know you are people, don't you? Not animals — human beings!"

His eyes heated; I feared it was time to be eaten. But he calmed, and his big head moved back and forth again.

"How did this happen?" he asked in a quieter voice. "Don't you have any minds left — any pride?" Slowly his eyes cooled. "Well, tell me about your family. Do you have a wife? Parents?"

I said nothing.

"You know, parents?"

"I do not understand what you say."

"Mother and father. Who gave you birth, you dummy?"

I tried to speak as ordered. "I do not know the female who bore me, if that is what you ask. All males help the females make little ones; it is our duty. Mamas care for little ones until they grow tall enough to be chain. Men help make little ones and stand chain; females stand chain and bear little ones to replace those who die. This is what we do. I hope this answers you."

I had spoken many words. I waited to see if he would be content with them. His dark mud eyes looked at me for a time.

"It can't be," he said at last. "You *are* animals. Everything's gone. Don't you think? Have any desire to know things? Do you read? Tell time? Count?" When I remained silent, he held up a finger as thick as my neck and shook it in front of me. "How many fingers is this?" I said nothing. He held up another. "Now how many?" Still I said nothing. "Look, here's one finger and here's one finger. How many is that together?"

I wanted to please him. "Some," I said.

His hands fell. "My God. Ignorant, superstitious — you breed like animals, have no names—" His voice sounded deep pain. "Why am I alive to see this?"

I fell back in fear. Water flowed from his eyes, wetting the fur on his face. Truly the beast was terrible to view.

His eyes looked down at me again; his voice carried anger. "What're you looking at, you little freak?"

If I did not answer each time he questioned, he would harm me. "I have never seen water falling from the eyes."

"You never cried? Do you do anything? Sing? Whistle? Laugh?"

"I don't—"

"I know, I know — you don't understand. Well, I think I do. You *don't* do anything, do you? Somebody said you were chain, so you stand there in a circle and you think that's all there is. Isn't that right?"

I understood only his words about chain. "I am chain, yes. I know nothing else you say."

"Don't you ever feel anything? Have you ever laughed?"

"Laughed?"

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He leaned back, and the terrible sound came again. When I cried out, he stopped.

"Why does that scare you? Didn't you ever hear anyone laugh before?"

"It is a fearful sound!" I cried. "The stories olders tell speak of that sound. It brings fear to all who hear it."

"What? Laughter's like medicine. Crazy as I am, even I know that! It makes you feel *good*. Do you know 'good'? 'Happy'? What do you say, for God's sake, when something pleases you?"

I tried so hard to do what he asked of me. "We — we are gladdened at times, like when Society breaks the stick."

It pleased him. "O.K., then — gladdened. You laugh when you're gladdened. It makes things better — you feel strong. Try it. Do like I do. Listen." The trees shivered from the terrible sound. When it stopped, my tight teeth would not loose my voice. "Do it!" the beast roared. "Laugh!"

The sound that came from me was very small. "Ha ha ha." He raised his hand. I thought he would strike me, and I spoke it again quickly. "Ha ha ha."

The beast's head moved slowly back and forth. "That's pitiful," he said. "That's the saddest thing I ever heard."

His question continued. The light time grew weak, and still he had not eaten me. I told him what he asked, of chain and the stories the olders tell. Sometimes he grew angry at what he heard. "Idiots! I never ate another human being in my life."

I spoke of Rounders, of Society, of what it was like to be chain. I told of the little one who tried to find the end of it. "About fifty miles across, if you want to know," the beast said. "I've walked it many times. But then, you wouldn't know a mile if it jumped up and bit you, would you?" I made a small sound when he spoke of biting, but he took no notice.

I talked of the changing air over chain — of the kind times and the evil. He asked me many questions of the white time; of the cold, white feathers; and how so many die. "God, the ignorance," he said in a softer voice. "You don't even know the seasons. How could so much have been lost? Those feathers are called snow, dummy. They're little pieces of frozen water, and they're caused by — oh, never mind."

Dark time fell around us. The beast made a fire of sticks and dead leaves on the flat rock, bringing it to life with a glowing coal he carried in a wrapping, just as mamas do in chain's camp. I had never spoken so many words. My voice pained me, but the beast continued to question, and I had to obey.

Finally he seemed to want no more of my words. He looked into the fire and lifted one big hand to dig his fingers into his head fur. "Gone," he said. "It's almost all gone. Why did

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I have to live to see it?"

His eyes looked at mine. "How do I make you understand it doesn't have to be like this? You're nothing but slaves, you know that? This ignorant Society of yours thinks that's what life's supposed to be. And, my God, you don't even question it! Just do what you're told."

He reached to grip my shoulder. I cried out in fear. "Listen to me!" he said. "You can do anything you want to do. You understand? See this hill? You could see what's over there beyond it — all of you could. Isn't there something, *anything*, you'd rather do than stand in one place all your life?"

His words loosed an old thought. "Once I thought to see the beast, and I have seen him. If I were to stay alive, I could tell the little ones we spoke together."

His hand loosed my shoulder. "The beast. You know how ridiculous it is to be terrified of something you've never even seen? Am I really as bad as the stories tell?"

I spoke my words carefully. "You *are* fearful to look upon, beast. You stand high in the air, you are covered with fur, and your voice brings fear to me. We know of your powers. Chain must protect our world from your evil. Society has ordered us."

Suddenly the beast stood up high on his feet. I cowered below him as his voice caused the air to shake.

"Damn your Society! Open your eyes. Can't you see? I'm a man just like you, except that I'm over six feet tall. I have no special powers. And, believe me, once men had hair on their bodies just like mine. It was all different. Look — look at these trees. You call these trees? They're *saplings* compared to what used to be!" His voice howled, like the animals we hear in the dark. "I don't want to see this! Let me die!!"

He made heavy breathing sounds for some time. Then he lifted me from where I had fallen facedown and set me up. He lowered himself beside me; he was calm again.

"Sorry I scared you. I told you I was crazy."

For a long time he said nothing, then his evil-colored eyes turned on me.

"You want a story to tell the little ones? I'll give you a story. You won't believe it, and neither will they. Hell, *I* don't believe it half the time. You listen — think about this when you're down there standing in your goddamn chain."

Once again he wanted to speak instead of eat me. I was grateful that my life would continue for another short time.

"You know anything about your ancestors and what went on in the world before you?" He looked at me closely. "No, of course you don't. You don't even know how old you are."

He leaned close to me.

"Well, I'm going to tell you how I know the world used to be different.

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This is a story about one man, a man named Al. Say it — Al."

"Al," I said, not knowing what was an al.

"That's a name. It's me, kid. Your beast's name is Al. I lived in this world, in a city — you know city? Hell, no. Anyhow, the city's name was Boston. Say it."

"Boston."

He talked long during the dark time — about so many strange things in his world that my memory could not hold them all. He spoke of cities containing many places like the Rounders' shed, only taller — as high as trees, as high as the air. He told of things called machines, and there were different kinds — kinds that had responsiblities, performed duties. He said there were machines that could be ridden, like horses, and that almost everyone who lived in this world had such machines. He spoke of machines that flew through the air like birds. When he told of these bird machines, he made the laugh sound again.

"I can just picture your little pea brain trying to figure out planes." I said nothing. I could believe the beast's world where everything had fearful powers.

He spoke more — of creatures called people who were much the same as man and female. These people were free — he questioned me about this word 'free.' When I could not understand, water again flowed from his eyes. All people in his world had these things called names, he said, and his words grew soft when he spoke of mother and father, friends and love.

Then he made his back tall and straight. "Then it ended. We didn't believe it would happen, but it did. Now comes the part that even *I* don't understand. See, I worked maintenance for transit — these were machines that ran underground. That spins your eyeballs, right? Well, I was down there, deep in the tunnels, when everything went. I'll never know who started it or how it happened —all I remember is everything coming down on me, and looking up to see these goddamn walls of water filling the tunnel. I didn't even have time to know I was going to drown."

I was growing tired. I had not had my dark-time rest, and my head pained me from trying to understand so much.

"It doesn't make sense," the beast said. His eyes looked into the fire. "I should be dead. How did I stay alive?"

I thought it strange that he asked his words of the fire. Perhaps in his world, fire could understand words.

"Oh, I heard of things like nuclear winter and freezing bodies for future cures, but I still don't know how — must've been some kind of freak chemical thing — I wish somebody could explain—" His eyes lifted to me.

"Anyway, I wake up in this shallow pool of water, see. And I'm all right.

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Of course that's not possible, but there I am anyway. And I say to myself, "Al, you gotta get the hell out of here.' So I dig and dig until I'm out of the tunnel and topside, and then — oh Jesus—"

Perhaps the beast had sickness in his voice. It trembled and seemed about to die.

"It was gone. Everything. I couldn't believe it. Forests growing where Boston should be. Except for piles of stuff here and there. it was like nothing had ever been."

He pushed his fingers into his head fur again.

"Well, I'll make it short from there. I started walking, see, trying to find if anything or anyone was left. It took me a long time to accept it. I covered the whole damn country a couple of times before I started seeing bunches of folks something like you — spindly, runty things — no offense, you understand. And finally it sank in. Everything couldn't look so — so old and unused; you people couldn't be the way you are unless time, a lot of time, had gone by."

Water flowed heavy from his eyes.

"That's the worst part, the time. I'll never know how much. I figure it had to be hundreds, ***hundreds*** of years at least, and there I was still walking around. That's when I knew all my kind were gone. You were what was left of them."

He lifted his head and made a soft sound like wind moving through grass.

"And I must've been around several hundred years since. Don't ask me how. What the hell happened to me? I'm getting older, but not much. I get sick, get hurt, and heal right up. See why I'm crazy? Tell you the truth, it gets so bad sometimes that I try to do myself in, but nothing ever works. I just go on and on. Isn't that something? You sit there not knowing how to live, and I don't know how to die."

The beast closed his big hand and pounded on the ground. His voice made choking sounds. "Well, what do you think, baldy? Is that the best story you ever heard?"

"I will think of your story many times," I said, trying to please him.

Suddenly he stood high. While he had been sitting on the ground, his true size had left my memory. Now I saw the fearful beast again, and I made the sound he called squeak.

"You see, that's why things have to change. It's ***awful*** what's happening to you. Someone has to start it. If you people don't do something, pretty soon man's going to disappear! You understand me at all?"

"I—I try, beast," I said in my small voice. "I try to know your words. I only know I am proud to be chain. Chain contains the beast."

He roared. The sound was louder than any other I had ever heard. He lifted me in his hands and pulled me close to his face. I saw his powerful white teeth, the little lines in his eyes that flowed with the color of blood.

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He shook me, my feet walking in the air, and his breath blew upon me like an evil wind.

"Proud?" His voice pounded at my ears. "To be chain? You idiot, look at me!"

How could I see him? I tried to make a sound, but my voice was shaken from me.

"You see my size — how strong I am? Do you honestly believe you've held me all these years? You poor fool, I stay inside because it *suits* me! Everybody leaves me alone and" — the choking sound came again — "I don't have anywhere left to go!"

He threw me — to the edge of the open place. My breath left me when I fell. I made small sounds that went unheard as the beast roared among the trees, lifting them from their roots with his powerful hands. The strength of his footsteps made the ground shiver under me. I lay helpless — now I would surely die.

"You're all that's left!" He leaned his head back and howled into the air. My teeth clicked in my head. "And you're past learning. You don't have any intelligence, any will! You'll all die out, and then there'll just be me!"

He turned suddenly; I feared my heart would fail. He took a long step toward me. I was not certain I could be brave after all. His big arms lifted; I closed my eyes.

"Get away from me! You make me sick to look at you. Go on. Get out! Get out!"

I did as he ordered. I ran. The wind cooled my face as my legs carried me down the hillside. I did not look back and I did not slow for an instant, and when I reached chain, crawled under the circled arms, my breath was almost gone. I lay there trembling, and from across the clear place, unseen on the hillside, the beast roared down. His voice brought terror to all who heard it.

"You! Rounders! See that one? Always send that one to feed me! Never anyone else, you understand? See that he stays alive. I want that one every time!"

When his voice had gone, the Rounders looked at me silently before pushing me back into place on chain. The light time was on us. No one spoke. Chain looked ahead and held hands against the beast.

My shivering finally calmed. All during that light time, my thoughts were of him. The stories were true. He was fearsome to see and his powers were great. I tried to keep all his words in my memory — the tall sheds, creatures called people, the machine things that flew in the air. Some of it I would tell the little ones — his fur, his great strong teeth, the wild scent he wore. I could not tell them all — too many of his words I did not understand. But I had viewed him. We had spoken, and he had not eaten me. And I would speak with him again. The beast had ordered it — the Rounders would have to obey.

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As the dark time began to cover chain, my thoughts fell on the terrible laugh sound. The beast said it was a gladden sound. Very small, only to my self, I spoke it.

"Ha. Ha ha ha."

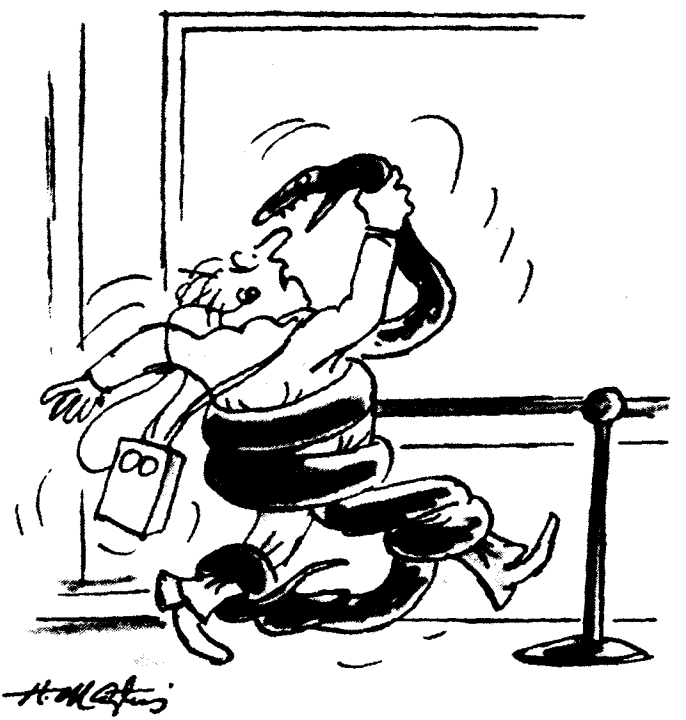
Another, standing at my side, turned his head slightly to listen.

"It is a laugh sound," I said so that no other could hear. "The beast says it gladdens him. It is not a hard sound to make."

He said nothing, and I did not make the laugh again. I would speak it later, when I was alone.

The light time grew weak. Chain stood silent.

"Listen," I said quietly to the other beside me. "During the white time, when the air falls in cold feathers — do you know the time I mean? Hold this in your memory. The beast spoke it. The feathers are called snow."



"In front of you now is the anaconda, Eunectes murinus, a large water boa from South America. Oviparous, the adult anaconda grows to a length of 20 feet, weighs around 230 pounds and feeds on. . ."

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Here is a new story about the minstrel-magician Lythande, in which the young traveler encounters the most frightful menace in all her considerable adventures. . .

The Walker Behind

BY
MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

As one who on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread
And turns but once to look around
And turns no more his head
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread. . . .

Lythande heard the following footsteps that night on the road: a little pause so that if she chose, she could have believed it merely the echo of her own light footfall. Step-pause-step, and then, after a little hesitation, step-pause-step, step-pause-step.

And at first she did think it an echo, but when she stopped for a moment to assess the quality of the echo, it went on for at least three steps into the silence:

Step-pause-step; step-pause-step.

Not an echo, then; but someone, or some *thing,* following her. In the world of the Twin Suns, where encountering magic was rather more likely than not, magic was more often than not of the evil kind. In a lifetime spanning at least three ordinary lifetimes, Lythande had encountered a great deal of magic; she was by necessity a mercenary-magician, an Adept of the Blue Star, and by choice a minstrel; and she had discovered early in her life that good magic was the rarest of all encounters and seldom came her way. She had lived this long by developing very certain instincts; and her instincts told her that this footfall following her was not benevolent.

She had no notion of what it might be. The simplest solution was that someone in the last town she had

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passed through had developed a purely material grudge against her, and was following her on mischief bent, for some reason or no reason at all — perhaps a mere mortal distrust of magicians, or of magic, a condition not all rare in Old Gandrin — and had chosen to take the law into his or her own hands and dispose of the unwelcome procurer of said magic. This was not at all rare, and Lythande had dealt with plenty of would-be assassins who wished to stop the magic by putting an effective stop to the magician; however powerful an Adept's magic, it could seldom survive a knife in the back. On the other hand, it could be handled with equal simplicity; after three ordinary lifetimes, Lythande's back had not yet become a sheath for knives.

So Lythande stepped off the road, loosening the first of her two knives in its scabbard — the simple white-handled knife, whose purpose was to handle purely material dangers of the road: footpads, assassins, thieves. She enveloped herself in the gray cloudy folds of the hooded mage-robe, which made her look like a piece of the night itself, or a shadow, and stood waiting for the owner of the footsteps to come up with her.

But it was not that simple. Step-pause-step, and the footfalls died; the mysterious follower was pacing her. Lythande had hardly thought it would be so simple. She sheathed the white-handled knife again, and stood motionless, reaching out with all her specially trained senses to focus on the follower.

What she felt first was a faint electric tingle in the Blue Star that was between her brows; and a small, not quite painful crackle in her head. *The smell of magic,* she translated to herself; whatever was following, it was neither as simple, nor as easily disposed of, as an assassin with a knife.

She loosened the black-handled knife in the left-hand scabbard and, stepping herself like a ghost or a shadow, retraced her steps at the side of the road. This knife was especially fashioned for supernatural menaces, to kill ghosts and anything else from specters to werewolves; no knife but this one could have taken her own life had she tired of it.

A shadow with an irregular step glided toward her, and Lythande raised the black-handled knife. It came plunging down, and the glimmer of the enchanted blade was lost in the shadow. There was a far-off, eerie cry that seemed to come, not from the shadow facing her on the dark road, but from some incredibly distant ghostly realm, to curdle the very blood in her veins, to wrench pain and lightnings from the Blue Star between her brows. Then, as that cry trembled into silence, Lythande felt the black handle of the knife come back into her hand, but a faint glimmer of moonlight showed her the handle alone; the blade had van-

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ished, except for some stray drops of molten metal that fell slowly to the earth and vanished.

So the blade was gone, the black-handled knife that had slain unnumbered ghosts and other supernatural beings. Judging by the terrifying cry, Lythande had wounded her follower; but had she killed the thing that had eaten her magical blade? Anything that powerful would certainly be tenacious of life.

And if her black-handled knife would not kill it, it was unlikely it could be killed by any spell, protection, or magic she could command at the moment. It had been driven away, perhaps, but she could not be certain she had freed herself from it. No doubt, if she went on, it would continue to follow her, and one day it would catch up with her on some other lonesome road.

But for the moment she had exhausted her protection. And . . . Lythande glowered angrily at the black knife handle and the ruined blade . . . she had deprived herself needlessly of a protection that had never failed her before. Somehow she must manage to replace her enchanted knife before she again dared the roads of Old Gandrin by night.

For the moment — although she had traveled too far and for too long to fear anything she was *likely* to encounter on any ordinary night — she would be wiser to remove herself from the road. Such encounters as a mercenary-magician, particularly one such as Lythande, should expect were seldom of the likely kind.

So she went on in the darkness, listening for the hesitating step of the follower behind. There was only the vaguest and most distant of sounds; that blow, and that screech, indicated that while she had probably not destroyed her follower, she had driven it at least for a while into some other place. Whether it was dead, or had chosen to go and follow someone safer, for the moment Lythande neither knew nor cared.

The important thing at the moment was shelter. Lythande had been traveling these roads for many years, and remembered that many years ago there had been an inn somewhere hereabouts. She had never chosen, before this, to shelter there — unpleasant rumors circulated about travelers who spent the night at that inn and were never seen again, or seen in dreadfully altered form. Lythande had chosen to stay away; the rumors were none of her business, and Lythande had not survived this long in Old Gandrin without knowing the first rule of survival, which was to ignore everything but your *own* survival. On the rare occasions when curiosity or compassion had prompted her to involve herself in anyone else's fate, she had had all kinds of reason to regret it.

Perhaps her obscure destiny had guided her on this occasion to inves-

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tigate these rumors. She looked down the black expanse of the road — without even moonlight — and saw a distant glimmer of light. Whether it was the inn of uncanny rumor, or whether it was the light of a hunter's campfire, or the lair of a were-dragon, there, Lythande resolved, she would seek shelter for the night. The last client to avail himself of her services as a mercenary-magician — a man who had paid her well to dehaunt his ancestral mansion — had left her with more than enough coin for a night at even the most luxurious inn; and if she could not pick up a commission to offset the cost of a night's shelter, she was no worse off. Besides, with the lute at her back, she could usually earn a supper and a bed as a minstrel; they were not common in this quarter.

A few minutes of brisk walking strengthened the vague light into a brilliantly shining lantern hung over a painted sign that portrayed the figure of an old woman driving a pig; the inn sign read the Hag and Swine. Lythande chuckled under her breath . . . the sign was comical enough, but it startled her that for such a cheerful sign there was no sound of music or jollity from inside; all was quiet as the very demon-haunted road itself. It made her remember again the very unsavory rumors about this very inn.

There was a very old story about a hag who had indeed attempted to transform random travelers into swine, and other forms, but Lythande could not remember where she had heard that story. Well, if she, an Adept of the Blue Star, was no match for any roadside hag, whatever her propensity for increasing her herd of swine — or perhaps furnishing her table with pork — at the expense of travelers, she deserved whatever happened to her. Shouldering her lute and concealing the handle of the ruined knife in one of the copious pockets of the mage-robe, Lythande strode through the half-open door.

Inside, it was light, but only by contrast with the moonless darkness of the outdoors. The only light was firelight, from a hearth where a pale fire flickered with a dim and unpleasant flame. Gathered around the hearth were a collection of people, mere shapes in the dim room; but as Lythande's eyes adapted to the darkness, she began to make out forms, perhaps half a dozen men and women and a couple of shabby children; all had pinced faces, and pushed-in noses that were somehow porcine. From the dimness arose the tall, heavy form of a woman, clad in shapeless garments that seemed to hang on her anyhow, much patched and botched.

Ah, thought Lythande, ***this innkeeper must be the hag. And those wretched children might very well be the swine.*** Even secretly the jest pleased her.

In an unpleasant, snuffling voice, the tall hag demanded, "Who are you,

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sir, going about on the road where there be nowt but hants an' ghosts at this season?"

Lythande's first impulse was to gasp out, "I was *driven* here by evil magic; there is a monstrous Thing out there, prowling about this place!" But she managed to say instead, peacefully, "Neither hant nor ghost, but a wandering minstrel frightened like yourselves by the dangers of the road, and in need of supper and a night's lodging."

"At once, sir," said the hag, suddenly turning deferential. "Come to the fire and warm thyself."

Lythande came through the jostling crowd of small figures — yes, they were children, and at close range even more unpleasantly piglike; their sounds and snuffles made them even more animal. She felt a distinct revulsion for having them crowding against her. She was resigned to the "sir" with which the hag-innkeepeer had greeted her; Lythande was the only woman ever to penetrate the mysteries of the Order of the Blue Star, and when (already sworn as an Adept, the Blue Star already blazing between her brows) she had been exposed as a woman, she was already protected against the worst they could have done. And so her punishment had been only this:

Be forever, then, had decreed the Master of the Star, *what you have chosen to seem; for on that day when any man save myself proclaims you a woman, then shall your magic be void and you may be slain and die.*

So for more than three ordinary lifetimes had Lythande wandered the roads as a mercenary-magician, doomed to eternal solitude; for she might reveal her true sex to no man, and while she might have a woman confidante if she could find one she could trust with her life, this exposed her chosen confidante to pressure from the many enemies of an Adept of the Blue Star; her first such confidante had been captured and tortured, and although she had died without revealing Lythande's secret, Lythande had been reluctant ever to expose another to that danger.

What had begun as a conscious masquerade was now her life; not a single gesture or motion revealed her as anything but the man she seemed — a tall, clean-shaven man with luxuriant fair hair, the blazing Blue Star between the high-arched shaven eyebrows, clad beneath the mage-robe in thigh-high boots, breeches, and a leather jerkin laced to reveal a figure muscular and broad-shouldered as an athlete, and apparently altogether masculine.

The innkeeper-hag brought a mug of drink and set it down before Lythande. It smelled savory and steamed hot; evidently a mulled wine with spices, a specialty of the house. Lythande lifted it to her lips, only pretending to sip; one of the many vows

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fencing about the powers of an Adept of the Blue Star was that they might never be seen to eat or drink in the presence of any man. The drink smelled good — as did the food she could smell cooking somewhere — and Lythande resented, not for the first time, the law that had often condemned her to long periods of thirst and hunger; but she was long accustomed to it, and recalling the singular name and reputation of this establishment, and the old story about the hag and swine, perhaps it was just as well to shun such food or drink as might be found in this place; it was by their greed, if she remembered the tale rightly, that the travelers had found themselves transformed into pigs.

The greedy snuffling of the hog-like children, if that was what they were, served as a reminder, and listening to it, she felt neither thirsty nor hungry. It was her custom at such inns to order a meal served in the privacy of her chamber, but she decided that in this place she would not indulge it; in the pockets of her mage-robe she kept a small store of dried fruit and bread, and long habit had accustomed her to snatching a hurried bite whenever she could do so unobserved.

She took a seat at one of the rough tables near the fireplace, the pot of ale before her, and, now and again pretending to take a sip of it, asked, "What news, friends?"

Her encounter fresh in her mind, she half expected to be told of some monster haunting the roadway. But nothing was volunteered. Instead, a rough-looking man seated on the opposite bench from hers, on the other side of the fireplace, raised his pot of ale and said, "Your health, sir; it's a bad night to be out. Storm coming on, unless I'm mistaken. And I've been traveling these roads, man and boy, for forty years."

"Oh?" inquired Lythande courteously. "I am new to these parts. Are the roads generally safe?"

"Safe enough," he grunted, "unless the folks get the idea you're a jewel carrier or some such." He needed to add no more; there were always thieves who might take the notion that some person was not so poor as he sought to appear (so as to seem to have nothing worth stealing), and cut him open looking for his jewels.

"And you?"

"I travel the roads as my old father did; I am a dog barber." He spoke the words truculently. "Anyone who has a dog to show or to sell knows I can make the beast look to its best advantage." Someone behind his back snickered, and he drew himself up to his full height and proclaimed, "It's a respectable profession."

"One of your kind," said a man before the fire, "sold my old father an old dog with rickets and the mange, for a healthy watchdog; the old critter hardly had the strength to bark."

"I don't sell dogs," said the man

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haughtily. "I only prepare them for show—"

"And o'course you'd never stoop to faking a mongrel up to look like a purebred, or fixing up an old dog with the mange to look like a young one with glossy topknots and long hair," said the heckler ironically. "Everybody in this county knows that when you have some bad old stock to get rid of, stolen horses to paint with false marks, there's old Gimlet the dog faker, worse than any gypsy for tricks—"

"Hey there, don't go insulting honest gypsies with your comparisons," said a dark man seated on a box on the floor by the fire and industriously eating a rich-smelling stew from a wooden bowl; he had a gold earring in his ear like one of that maligned race. "We trade horses all up and down this country from here to Northwander, and I defy any man to say he ever got a bad horse from any of our tribe."

"Gimlet the dog barber, are ye?" asked another of the locals, a shabby, squint-eyed man. "I been looking for you; don't you remember me?"

The dog barber put on a defiant face. "Afraid not, friend."

"I had a bitch last year had thirteen pups," said the newcomer, scowling. "Good bitch; been the pride and joy of my family since she was a pup. You said you'd fix her up a brew so she'd get her milk in and be able to feed them all—"

"Every dog handler learns something of the veterinary art," said Gimlet. "I can bring in a cow's milk, too, and—"

"Oh, I make no doubt you can shoe a goose, too, to hear you tell it," the man said.

"What's your complaint, friend? Wasn't she able to feed her litter?"

"Oh, aye, she was," said the complainer. "And for a couple of days, it felt good watching every little pup sucking away at her tits; then it occurred to me to count 'em, and there were no more than eight pups."

Gimlet restrained a smile.

"I said only that I would arrange matters so the bitch could feed all her brood; if I disposed of the runts who would have been unprofitable, without you having to harrow yourself by drowning them—," Gimlet began.

"Don't you go weaseling out of it," the man said, clenching his fists. "Any way you slice it, you owe me for at least five good pups."

Gimlet looked round. "Well, that's as may be," he said. "Maybe tomorrow we can arrange something. It never occurred to me you'd get chesty about the runts in the litter, more than any bitch could raise. Not unless you've a childless wife or young daughter who wants to cosset something and hankers to feed 'em with an eyedropper and dress 'em in doll's clothes; more trouble than it's worth, most folks say. But here's my hand on

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it." He stuck out his hand with such a friendly, open smile of good faith that Lythande was enormously entertained; between the rogue and the yokel, Lythande, after years spent traveling the roads, was invariably on the side of the rogue. The disgruntled dog owner hesitated a moment, but finally shook his hand and called for another pot of beer for all the company.

Meanwhile the hag-innkeeper, hovering to see if it would come to some kind of fight, and looking just a little disappointed that it had not, stopped at Lythande's side.

"You, sir, will you be wanting a room for the night?"

Lythande considered. She did not particularly like the look of the place, and if she spent the night, resolved she would not feel safe in closing her eyes. On the other hand, the dark road outside was less attractive than ever, now that she had tasted the warmth of the fireside. Furthermore, she had lost her magical knife, and would be unprotected on the dark road with *some Thing* following.

"Yes," she said, "I will have a room for the night."

The price was arranged — neither cheap nor outrageous — and the innkeeper asked, "Can I find you a woman for the night?"

This was always the troublesome part of traveling in male disguise. Lythande, whatever her romantic desires, had no wish for the kind of women kept in country inns for traveling customers, without choice; they were usually sold into this business as soon as their breasts grew, if not before. Yet it was a singularity to refuse this kind of accommodation, and one that could endanger the long masquerade on which her power depended.

Tonight she did not feel like elaborate excuses.

"No, thank you; I am weary from the road and will sleep." She dug into her robe for a couple of spare coins. "Give the girl this for her trouble."

The hag bowed. "As you will, sir, Frennet! Show the gentleman to the south room."

A handsome girl, tall and straight and slender, with silky hair looped up into elaborate curls, rose from the fireside and gestured with a shapely arm half concealed by silken draperies. "This way, if ye please," she said, and Lythande rose, edging between Gimlet and the dog owner. In a pleasant, mellow voice, she wished the company good night.

The stairs were old and rickety, stretching up several flights, but had once been stately — about four owners ago, Lythande calculated. Now they were hung with cobwebs, and the higher flights looked as if they might be the haunt of bats, too. From one of the posts at a corner landing, a dark form ascended, flapping its wings, and cried out in a hoarse, croaking sound:

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"Good evening, ladies! Good evening, ladies!"

The girl Frennet raised an arm to warn off the bird.

"That accursed jackdaw! Madame's pet, sir; pay no attention," she said good-naturedly, and Lythande was glad of the darkness. It was beneath the dignity of an Adept of the Blue Star to take notice of a trained bird, however articulate.

"Is that all it says?"

"Oh no, sir; quite a vocabulary the creature has, but then, you see, you never know what it's going to say, and sometimes it can rarely startle you if you ain't expecting it," said Frennet, opening the door to a large, dark chamber. She went inside and lighted a candelabrum standing by the huge, draped four-poster. The jackdaw flapped in the doorway and croaked hoarsely, "Don't go in there, Madame! Don't go in there, Madame!"

"Just let me get rid of her for you, sir," said Frennet, taking up a broom and making several passes with it, attempting to drive the jackdaw back down the staircase. Then she noticed that Lythande was still standing in the doorway of the room.

"It's all right, sir; you can go right in. You don't want to let her scare you. She's just a stupid bird."

Lythande had stopped cold, however, not so much because of the bird as because of the sharp pricking of the Blue Star between her brows. *The smell of magic,* she thought, wishing she were a hundred leagues from the Hag and Swine; without her magical knife, she was unwilling to spend a minute, let alone a night, in a room that smelled evilly of magic as that one did.

She said pleasantly, "I am averse to the omens, child. Could you perhaps show me to another chamber where I might sleep? After all, the inn is far from full, so find me another room, there's a good girl?"

"Well, I dunno what the mistress would say," began Frennet dubiously, while the bird shrieked, "There's a good girl! There's a clever girl!" Then she smiled and said, "But what she dunna know won't hurt her, I reckon. This way."

Up another flight of stairs, and Lythande felt the numbing prickling of the Blue Star, *the smell of magic,* recede and drop away. The rooms on this floor were lighted and smaller, and Frennet turned into one of them.

"Me own room, sir; yer welcome to the half of my bed if ye wish it, an' no obligation. I mean — I heard ye say ye didn't want a woman, but you sent a tip for me, and —" She stopped, swallowed, and said determindedly, her face flushing, "I dunno why yer traveling like a man, ma'am. But I reckon ye have yer reasons, an' they's none of me business. But ye came here in good faith for a night's lodgin', and I think ye've a right to that and nothin' else." The girl's face was red and embarrassed. "I swore no oath to

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keep my mouth shut about what's goin' on here, and I don't want your death on my hands, so there."

"My death?" Lythande said. "What do you mean, child?"

"Well, I'm in for it now," Frennet said, "but ye've a right to know, ma'am — sir — noble stranger. Folk who sleep here don't come back no more human; did ye see those little children down yonder? They're only halfway changed; the potions don't work all that well on children. I saw you didn't drink yer wine; so when they came to drive you out to the sty, you'd still be human and they'd kill you — or drive you out in the dark, where the Walker Behind can have ye."

Shivering, Lythande recalled the entity that had destroyed her magical knife. That, then, had been the Walker Behind.

"What is this — this Walker Behind?" she asked.

"I dunno, ma'am. Only it *follows,* and draws folk into the other world; thass all I know. Ain't nobody ever come back to tell what it is. Only I hears 'em scream when it starts followin' them."

Lythande stared about the small, mean chamber. Then she asked, "How did you know that I was a woman?"

"I dunno, ma'am. I always knows, that's all. I always knows, no matter what. I won't tell the missus; I promise."

Lythande sighed. Perhaps the girl was somewhat psychic; she had accepted a long time ago that while her disguise was usually opaque to men, there would always be a few women who for one reason or another would see through it. Well, there was nothing to be done about it, unless she were willing to murder the girl, which she was not.

"See that you do not; my life depends on it," she said. "But perhaps you need not give up your bed to me either; can you guide me unseen out of this place?"

"That I can, ma'am, but it's a wretched night to be out, and the Walker Behind in the dark out there. I'd hate to hear you screamin' when it comes to take you away."

Lythande chuckled, but mirthlessly. "Perhaps instead you would hear *it* screaming when I came to take *it*," she said. "I think that is what I encountered before I came here."

"Yes'm. It drives folk in here because it wants 'em, and then it takes their souls. I mean, when they's turned into pigs, I guess they don't need their souls no more, see? And the Walker Behind takes them."

"Well, it will not take me," Lythande said briefly. "Nor you, if I can manage it. I encountered this thing before I came here; it took my knife, so I must somehow get another."

"They's plenty of knives in the kitchen, ma'am," Frennet said. "I can take ye out through there."

Together they stole down the stairs, Lythande moving like a ghost in

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that silence that had caused many people to swear that they had seen Lythande appear to disappear into thin air. In the parlor most of the guests had gone to rest; she heard a strange grunting sound. Upstairs there were curious grunting noises; on the morrow, Lythande supposed, they would be driven out to the sty, their souls left for the Walker Behind and their bodies to reappear as sausages or roast pork. In the kitchen, as they passed, Lythande saw the innkeeper — the hag. She was chopping herbs; the pungent scent made Lythande think of the pungent drink she had fortunately not tasted.

So why had this evil come to infest this country? Her extended magical senses could now hear the step in the dark, prowling outside: the Walker Behind. She could sense and feel its evil circling in the dark, awaiting its monstrous feast of souls. But how — and why? — had anything human, even that hag, come to join hands with such a ghastly thing of damnation?

There had been a saying in the Temple of the Star that there was no fathoming the depths either of Law or of Chaos. And surely the Walker Behind was a thing from the very depths of Chaos; and Lythande, as a Pilgrim adept, was solemnly sworn to uphold forever and defend Law against Chaos even at the Final Battle at the end of the world.

"There are some things," she observed to the girl Frennet, "that I would prefer not to encounter until the Final Battle where Law will defeat Chaos at world's end. And of those things the Walker Behind is first among them; but the ways of Chaos do not await my convenience; and if I encounter it now, at least I need not meet it at the end of the world." She stepped quietly into the kitchen, and the hag jerked up her head.

"You? I thought you was sleeping by now, magician. I even sent you the girl—"

"Don't blame the girl; she did as you bade her," Lythande said. "I came hither to the Hag and Swine, though I knew it not, to rid the world of a pigsty of Chaos. Now you shall feed your own evil servant."

She gestured, muttering the words of a spell; the hag flopped forward on all fours, grunting and snuffling. Outside in the dark, Lythande sensed the approach of the great evil Thing, and motioned to Frennet.

"Open the door, child."

Frennet flung the door open; Lythande shoved the grunting thing outside over the threshold. There was a despairing scream — half animal but dreadfully half human — from somewhere; then only the body of a pig remained grunting in the foggy darkness of the innyard. From the shadowy Walker outside, there was a satisfied croon that made Lythande shudder. Well, so much for the Hag and

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Swine; she had deserved it.

"There's nothing left of her, ma'am."

"She deserves to be served up as sausages for breakfast, dressed with her own herbs," Lythande remarked, looking at what was left, and Frennet shook her head.

"I'd have no stomach for her meself, ma'am."

The jackdaw flapped out into the kitchen crying, "Clever girl! Clever girl! There's a good girl!" and Lythande said, "I think if I had my way, I'd wring that bird's neck. There's still the Walker to deal with; she was surely not enough to satisfy the appetite of — that thing."

"Maybe not, ma'am," Frennet said, "but you could deal with her; can you deal with it? It'll want your soul more than hers, mighty magician as you must be."

Lythande felt serious qualms; the innkeeper-hag, after all, had been but a small evil. But in her day, Lythande had dealt with a few large evils, though seldom any as great and terrifying as the Walker. And this one had already taken her magical knife. Had the spells weakened it any?

A long row of knives was hanging on the wall; Frennet took down the longest and most formidable, proffering it to her, but Lythande shook her head, passing her hand carefully along the row of knives. Most knives were forged for material uses only, and she did not think any of them would be much use against this great magic out of Chaos.

The Blue Star between her brows tingled, and she stopped, trying to identify the source of the magical warning. Was it only that she could hear, out in the darkness of the innyard, the characteristic step of the Walker Behind?

Step-pause-step.

Step-pause-step.

No, the source was closer than that. It lay — moving her head cautiously, Lythande identified the source — the cutting board that lay on the table; the hag had been cutting her magical herbs, the ones to transform the unwary into swine. Slowly, Lythande took up the knife; a common kitchen one with a long, sharp blade. All along the blade was the greenish mark of the herb juices. From the pocket of her mage-robe, Lythande took the ruined handle — the elaborately carved hilt with magical runes — of her ruined knife, looked at it with a sigh — she had always been proud of the elegance of her magical equipment, and this was hearth-witch, or kitchen-magic at best — and flung it down with the kitchen remnants.

Frennet clutched at her. "Oh, don't go out there, ma'am! It's still out there a-waiting for you."

And the jackdaw, fluttering near the hearth, shrieked, *"Don't go out there! Oh, don't go out there!"*

Gently, Lythande disengaged the girl's arms. "You stay here," she said.

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"You have no magical protection; and I can give you none." She drew the mage-robe's hood closely about her head, and stepped into the foggy innyard.

It was there; she could feel it waiting, circling, prowling, its hunger a vast evil maw to be filled. She knew it hungered for her, to take in her body, her soul, her magic. If she spoke, she might find herself in its power. The knife firmly gripped in her hand, she traced out a pattern of circling steps, sunwise in spite of the darkness. If she could hold the Thing of darkness in combat till sunrise, the very light might destroy it; but it could not be much after midnight. She had no wish to hold this dreadful Thing at bay till sunrise, even if her powers should prove equal to it.

So it must be dispatched at once . . . and she hoped, since she had lost her own magical knife, with the knife she had taken from the monstrous Thing's own accomplice. Alone in the fog, despite the bulky warmth of the mage-robe, Lythande felt her body dripping with ice — or was it only terror? Her knees wobbled, and the icy drips seemed to course down between her shoulders, which spasmed as if expecting a knife driven between them. Frennet, shivering in the light of the doorway, was watching her with a smile, as if she had not the slightest doubt.

Is this what men feel when their women are watching them? Certainly, if she should call the Thing to her and fail to destroy it, it would turn next on the girl, and for all she knew, on the jackdaw, too; and neither of them deserved death, far less soul-destruction. The girl was innocent, and the jackdaw only a dumb creature . . . well, a harmless creature; dumb it wasn't; it was still crying out gibberish.

"Oh, my soul, it's coming! It's coming! Don't go out there!"

It was coming; the Blue Star between her brow was pricking like live coals, the blue light burning through her brain from the inside out. Why, in the name of all the gods there ever were or weren't, had she ever thought she wanted to be a magician? Well it was years too late to ask that. She clenched her hand on the rough wooden handle of the kitchen knife of the kitchen hag, and thrust up roughly into the greater darkness that was the Walker, looming over her and shadowing the whole of the innyard.

She was not sure whether the great scream that enveloped the world was her own scream of terror, or whether it came from the vast dark vortex that whirled around the Walker; she was enveloped in a monstrous whirlwind that swept her off her feet and into dark fog and dampness. She had time for a ghostly moment of dread — suppose the herbs on the blade should transform the

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Walker into a great Hog of Chaos? And how could she meet it if it did? But this was the blade of the Walker's own accomplice in his own magic of Chaos; she thrust into the Thing's heart and, buffeted and battered by the whirlwinds of Chaos, grimly hung on.

Then there was a sighing sound, and something unreeled and was gone. She was standing in the innyard, and Frennet's arms were hugging hard.

The jackdaw shrieked, *It's gone! It's gone! Oh, good girl, good girl!*

It was gone. The innyard was empty of magic, only fog on the moldering stones. There was a shadow in the kitchen behind Frennet; Lythande went inside and saw, wrapped in his cloak and ready to depart, the pudgy face and form of Gimlet, the dog faker.

"I was looking for the innkeeper," he said truculently. "This place is too noisy for me; too much going on in the halls; and there's the girl. You," he said crossly to Frennet. "Where's your mistress? And I thought you were to join me."

Frennet said sturdily, "I'm me own mistress now, sir. And I ain't for sale, not any more. As for the mistress, I dunno where she is; you can go an' ask for her at the gates of Heaven, an' if you don't find her there — well, you know where you can go."

It took a minute for that to penetrate his dull understanding; but when it did, he advanced on her with a clenched fist.

"Then I been robbed of your price!"

Lythande reached into the pockets of the mage-robe. She handed him a coin.

"Here; you've made a profit on the deal, no doubt — as you always do. Frennet is coming with me."

Gimlet stared and finally pocketed the coin, which — Lythande could tell from his astonished eyes — was the biggest he had ever seen.

"Well, good sir, if you say so. I got to be off about my dogs. I wonder if I could get some breakfast first."

Lythande gestured to the joints of meat hanging along the wall of the kitchen. "There's plenty of ham, at least."

He looked up, gulped, and shuddered. "No, thanks." He slouched out into the darkness, and Lythande gestured to the girl.

"Let's be on our way."

"Can I really come with you?"

"For a while, at least," Lythande said. The girl deserved that. "Go quickly, and fetch anything you want to take."

"Nothing from here," she said. "But the other customers—"

"They'll turn human again now that the hag's dead, such of 'em as haven't been served up for roast pork," Lythande said. "Look there." And indeed, the joints of ham hanging along the wall had taken on a horrible and familiar look, not porcine at all. "Let's get out of here."

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They strode down the road toward the rising sun, side by side, the jackdaw fluttering after, crying out, "Good morning, ladies! Good morning, ladies."

"Before the sun rises," Lythande said, "I shall wring that bird's neck."

"Oh, aye," Frennet said. "Or dumb it wi' your magic. May I ask why you travel in men's clothes, Lady?"

Lythande smiled and shrugged.

"Wouldn't you?"

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BRIGHTENING STARS

I was asked recently to write an essay on the new motion picture "Star Trek IV: The Journey Home." A young lady, working for the people who wanted the essay, undertook to obtain a pair of tickets to the preview for me and for herself. She would then tell me where and when to meet her.

The days passed and I heard nothing further about the project. Early on the very day of the preview she finally phoned me. It seemed she had had a great deal of trouble obtaining the tickets.

"Why?" I asked. "You represent an important outlet and the movie people should be overjoyed at the thought of having me write about the picture, since they must know I'm fond of Star Trek."

"That's the point," said the exasperated young lady. "When they seemed reluctant to let me have tickets, I said to them, 'Don't you *want* Isaac Asimov to write about the picture?' And the girl at the other end said, 'Who is Isaac Asimov?' Can you *imagine*?"

I laughed and said, "Of course I can imagine. I estimate that about one American in a hundred has heard of me. You just encountered one of the other ninety-nine percent. What did you do?"

She said, "I xeroxed the several pages of ***Books in Print*** that listed your books and messengered it to the

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girl with a note that said, '*This* is Isaac Asimov.' She phoned at once and said the tickets would be waiting at the box office."

The young lady and I went to the box office in due time, found the tickets indeed waiting for us, and went in to see the picture (which I thoroughly enjoyed). And when, as was inevitable, people near my seat began to pass me their programs for my signature, my companion fumed, "*How* could that person not know you?"

And I said, "Please. I welcome incidents like that. It helps keep my feet on the ground."

Nevertheless, I don't want it to happen too often, so I'll keep on writing these essays, and perhaps one or two more people will hear of me as a result.

Last month, I wrote about novas, or "new stars", which suddenly blazed out in the heavens. I ended with the nova of 1604, observed by Johannes Kepler, and mentioned that it was the very last nova to appear in the heavens with a brightness that rivalled that of planets such as Jupiter or Venus.

Now let us move on. In 1609, the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) constructed a telescope after hearing rumors that such a device had been invented in the Netherlands. He then did something that the earlier telescopists did not think of doing. He turned it on the heavens.

One of the first things that Galileo did with his telescope was to look through it at the Milky Way. He found the Milky Way to be not just a luminous mist, but an aggregation of very faint stars, individually too dim to be seen with the unaided eye. In fact, wherever Galileo turned his telescope he found that the instrument brightened all the stars and made visible numerous stars that were ordinarily too dim to see.

To us that does not seem startling. After all, there is a vast range of brightness in the heavenly bodies, from the Sun itself right down to the dimmest stars we can see. Why should not the range be extended to still fainter stars too dim to make out? To us, it might seem, in hindsight, that Galileo's discovery was merely a confirmation of something that was so obvious it scarcely need confirmation.

That was not the way it seemed in Galileo's time, however. People were then quite certain that the Universe was created by God for the specific use of human beings. Everything in existence was designed to make human life possible, or to add to human comfort, or to serve to

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develop the human character and exercise the human soul, or, at the very least, to inculcate an improving moral lesson.

But what possible use could invisible stars have?

The impulse must have been to suppose that stars that were visible only in a telescope were artifactitious; that they were somehow created by the telescope, and were illusions that did not exist in reality. Indeed, there is a well-known story that when Galileo discovered the four large satellites of Jupiter, one scholar pointed out that since these satellites were nowhere mentioned in the writings of Aristotle, they did not exist.

However, the use of the telescope spread. Many were constructed, and the same stars seen and reported by Galileo were seen and reported by other astronomers as well. Eventually, it had to be accepted that God had created invisible stars, and this was the very first hint that perhaps the Universe had not been created with human welfare as its primary object (a point I have never seen stressed in histories of science).

The discovery couldn't help but alter the way astronomers looked at novas. As long as only visible stars were thought to exist, a star that became visible where none had been visible before, had to be thought of as coming into existence for the first time. It was a *new* star (and, as I pointed out last month, the very word "nova" is Latin for "new"). Again, when a nova faded to invisibility, it had to be thought of as passing out of existence.

If a star could exist, however, that was too dim to see without a telescope, it might have simply been too dim to see, but brightened until it became visible to the unaided eye and then, eventually, dimmed until it was too dim to see without a telescope.

A nova might not be a new star, then, but merely one whose brightness was not constant, as was the case for ordinary stars. A nova was a "variable" star.

This was soon shown to be so in connection with the apparent nova that had been sighted in 1596 by David Fabricius (as mentioned last month) in the constellation of Cetus. At its peak, it was a star of only middling brightness — of the 3rd magnitude — but after a while it disappeared. That made it a nova in those pre-telescope days.

In 1638, however, a Dutch astronomer, Holwarda of Franeker (1618-1651), sighted a star precisely where Fabricius had seen his nova forty-two years earlier. Holwarda watched it fade, apparently disappear, and then eventually return. But Holwarda had the advantage of a telescope, and, as he watched the star, he found that it never really dis-

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appeared. It grew dimmer, yes, until it couldn't be seen by the eye alone, but it remained visible at all times when viewed through the telescope.

A variable star, in those days, was as revolutionary as a new star. The old Greek doctrine of the changeless perfection of the heavens was upset as completely by the one as by the other.

It turned out that, at its brightest, the star observed first by Fabricius and then by Holwarda, was about 250 times as bright as it was at its dimmest, and it oscillated between these two extremes every eleven months or so. The German astronomer Johannes Hevelius (1611-1687) gave this star the name of Mira (Latin for "wonderful") as a tribute to its astonishing property of variability.

Mira was the first variable star to be discovered, but as time went on, others were noted as well. Most variables turned out to be less variable than Mira, however.

In 1667, an Italian astronomer, Geminiano Montanari (1633-1687), noticed that Algol, a star in the constellation Perseus, was variable. The variability was extremely regular, the star going through a cycle of brightening and dimming every 69 hours. At its brightest, Algol was only three times as bright as it was at its dimmest.

In 1784, an English astronomer, John Goodricke (1764-1786), discovered that the star Delta Cephei in the constellation Cepheus varied with a regular cycle of 5.5 days, but was only twice as bright at its brightest as at its dimmest.

Many such variable stars are now known, and it might easily be argued that novas were variables, too. However, considering how brilliantly they shone, their brightness must alter to a much greater degree than was true of ordinary variables. Furthermore, since novas such as those observed by Tycho Brahe and by Kepler seemed to appear once and were then forever invisible, they must be very *irregularly* variable.

All this indicated that there must be something very unusual about novas, and it was a source of frustration among astronomers that, although they now had telescopes at the ready, no bright nova appeared in the sky after 1604.

In fact, even comparatively dim novas didn't appear (or, at least, weren't sighted) for a long time. In 1848, however, the English astronomer John Russell Hind (1823-1895) observed a nova in the constellation of Ophiuchus. It didn't even reach 4th magnitude, however, so it was a rather dim star and would certainly have gone totally unnoticed in

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the days when fewer astronomers studied the sky and did so in lesser detail.

Hind's nova was not an ordinary variable star because, having faded out, it didn't brighten again. There was no clear cycle of variability. It was a "one-shot," in other words, something that seemed at that time to be the key characteristic of a nova.

Three or four other such dim novas were detected in the remaining years of the 19th century. One of them was detected in 1891 by a Scottish clergyman and amateur astronomer, T. D. Anderson. It was only at the 5th magnitude and was the dimmest nova that had yet been reported.

Then, on the night of February 21, 1901, Anderson discovered a *second* nova, while walking home from some social engagement. This one, in the constellation of Peseus, came to be called "Nova Persei."

Anderson had caught it early and it was still brightening. Two days later, it reached its peak at a magnitude of 0.2. That made it as bright as Vega, the fourth brightest star. It was still well short of planetary brightness, but it was the brightest nova in three centuries.

By now, moreover, astronomers had the technique of photography at their disposal, and this made it possible to find out something about novas that could not have been managed earlier.

The region of the sky in which Nova Persei shone had been frequently photographed, and, by looking at photographs taken before the nova had appeared, astronomers found that in the very spot in which Nova Persei was later shining, there existed a very dim star of the 13th magnitude. As they watched Nova Persei dim, they found that it eventually returned to the 13th magnitude.

In four days, it turned out, Nova Persei had increased its brightness 160,000 times, and, after a few months, all that added brightness was lost again. It was indeed an extreme variable, and its behavior was widely different from that of ordinary variables.

What's more, the camera could, by taking a long exposure, reveal detail that would escape the mere eye, even when reinforced by a telescope.

Some seven months after Nova Persei had blazed away in the sky, a long exposure film of the dim star into which it had faded revealed a faint fog of light around it that gradually, over the weeks and months, grew in size. There was clearly a thin cloud of dust about the star that was reflecting light and expanding. By 1916, fifteen years later, the

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cloud had grown thicker and was continuing to expand outward from the star in all directions.

It seemed clear that the star had suffered a titanic explosion that had expelled gases. Nova Persei (and presumably other novas) were therefore said to belong to a group of stars called "eruptive variables," or "explosive variables." Such names, however, although descriptive and picturesque, could not and did not replace the older, shorter and time-honored "nova."

A still brighter nova was seen by several different observers on June 8, 1918 in the constellation Aquila. At that time, it was a first-magnitude of star, and two days later it was at its peak, shining with a magnitude of -1.1, or with almost the brightness of Sirius, the brightest star.

Nova Aquilae appeared during World War I, just as the Germans last great offensive on the western front was beginning to run out of steam. Five months later, Germany surrendered, and Nova Aquilae was called "the star of victory" by the Allied soldiers at the front.

Again, Nova Aquilae could be seen in photographs taken before it had explosed. It was about three times as bright as its peak as Nova Persei had been (and no nova so bright has been seen since), but Nova Aquilae had been brighter to start with and brightened only 50,000 times as it exploded.

As it happened, Nova Aquilae had had its spectrum photographed before it had become a nova and, to this day, it is the *only* nova to have had its pre-nova spectrum recorded. The spectrum showed it to be a hot star with a surface temperature twice that of our Sun. This makes sense, for even without knowing anything about the details of a stellar explosion, it would seem logical that a hot star would be more likely to explode than a cooler one would.

In December 1934, a nova appeared in the constellation Hercules that managed to reach a magnitude of 1.4. Nova Herculis was not as bright as either Nova Persei or Nova Aquilae, and it would not have attracted much attention, except that after it returned to the 13th magnitude from which it had started four months earlier, it suddenly began to brighten again. After another four months, it was almost bright enough to be seen with the unaided eye. It was not till 1949 that it returned to the 13th magnitude a second time. Apparently, stars could brighten more than once, and astronomers began to speak of "recurrent novas."

The most recent notable nova appeared in the constellation Cygnus on August 19, 1975. Nova Cygni brightened with unusual speed, becom-

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ing 30,000,000 times brighter in the course of a single day, and reaching the 2nd magnitude. It faded off rapidly and was lost to the unaided sight within three weeks. Apparently, the faster and more extreme the brightening, the faster and more extreme the dimming.

And yet none of these novas I mentioned as having appeared during the days of the telescope are nearly as important as one I haven't mentioned; one that, at its peak, might have been just barely bright enough to be seen by the unaided eye.

This particular nova, which appeared in the constellation of Andromeda, may have been observed for the first time, on August 17, 1885, by a French astronomer, L. Gully. He was testing a new telescope, which turned out to be defective, and so he didn't feel he ought to make a fuss about sighting a new star that might not really be there.

An Irish amateur astronomer, I. W. Ward, may have observed the star on August 19, but again no fuss was made at the time, and he advanced his claim only later on.

The official observer was the German astronomer Ernst Hartwig (1851-1923), his first observation of the nova being on August 20, 1885. He judged it to be of the 7th magnitude and possibly nearly the 6th magnitude.

The Moon, however, was almost full and observation was difficult. Hartwig decided to make further observations before announcing the new star, but (of course) a week's worth of cloudy weather promptly intervened. Finally, on August 31, he sent off an official report. At once, other astronomers turned their telescopes on Andromeda.

The star at the time was still up in the region of the 7th magnitude. Until that time no nova had been seen quite that dim, and so there was no thought at first that that was what it was. It seemed an ordinary variable star. A variable star is named for its constellation and is given a letter prefix, starting with R and progressing up the alphabet. Since Hartwig's star was the second variable star to be recorded in Andromeda, it received the name S Andromedae.

By the end of August, however, the star was beginning to fade rapidly, and it continued to fade until, half a year later, it had sunk to the 14th magnitude. It had been a nova, though an extraordinary dim one, but it kept its name.

S Andromedae, however, was not merely in Andromeda, but in the center of an object within the constellation, an object called the "An-

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dromeda nebula" — and that is a story in itself.

The first person to view the nebula through a telescope, in 1611, was the German astronomer Simon Marius (1573-1624). It was then clearly seen to be no star. It was not a point-like twinkle of light, but an extended misty object like a tiny cloud in the sky. (The word "nebula" is Latin for "cloud.")

The fuzzy objects that seemed most important to the astronomers of the 18th Century were comets, but the Andromeda nebula, and other objects like it, were *not* comets. A comet shifted position in the sky, changed its shape and brightness, and so on. The various nebulas, however, were changeless and motionless. Nevertheless, such nebulas were sometimes sighted by enthusiastic astronomers who thought they had discovered a new comet, and then found that they were wrong.

The most important comet hunter of the 18th Century was the French astronomer Charles Messier (1730-1817), and he resented being fooled this way.

In 1781, therefore, he began to make a catalog of all the cloudy objects in the sky that might be mistaken for comets. His intention was to have every comet hunter, before announcing a new comet, check his finding against the catalog and make sure he had not been fooled. Messier numbered the objects in the catalog (there were eventually 102 of them listed), and they are sometimes still known by that number with "M" (for Messier) as a prefix.

You can be sure that Messier included the Andromeda nebula in his catalog. It was in thirty-first place, so that the Andromeda nebula is often referred to as M31 in consequence.

The Andromeda nebula puzzled astronomers. The most familiar fogginess in the sky was, of course, the Milky Way, and Galileo had shown that it was composed of very faint stars that, without the telescope, melted into a luminous haze.

In the southern hemisphere, one can see two cloudy patches that look like detached bits of the Milky Way. They were first sighted by Europeans in 1519 during the voyage of Ferdinand Magellan (1480-1521), which followed the coast of South America to its southernmost reaches in the course of its trail-blazing circumnavigation of the Earth. The patches are called the "Magellanic clouds" in consequence, and these too could be seen by the telescope to be made up of masses of faint stars.

The Andromeda nebula, however, though it seemed to resemble the

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Milky Way and the Magellanic clouds in appearance, could not be resolved into stars by any telescope of the 18th Century (or of the 19th, for that matter). Why was that?

The first to express a useful idea on the subject was the German philospher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In 1755, he reasoned that it must be that the Andromeda nebula, and other similar patches of cosmic fog, were indeed composed of stars, but were so far away, so much farther away than either the Milky Way or the Magellanic cloud, that even the best telescopes astronomers had were insufficient to separate the fog into stars. He spoke of the nebulas as "island universes."

Kant was right, dead right, in this, but it made no impression on the world of astronomy. It was too far ahead of its time. Astronomers in the 18th Century had not yet determined the distance of any star, but there was a growing feeling that they must be very far away. The English astronomer Edmund Halley (1656-1742) had been the first to speak of stellar distances in terms of what we now call "light-years."

Astronomers, however, had been living in a small Universe all through history. The Universe had been visualized as barely large enough to hold what we now call the Solar system — and a Solar system that was viewed as much smaller than we now know it to be. To expand one's horizon to light-years was hard enough, but when Kant spoke of distances far greater still, so great that even telescopes couldn't make out individual stars, that was too much. Astronomers shuddered and turned away.

Less visionary, and, therefore, more acceptable, was a second view, that of the French astronomer Pierre Simon de Laplace (1749-1827). He suggested, in 1798, that the Solar system was, to begin with, a vast spinning cloud of gas and dust that slowly condensed, with the center of the cloud becoming the Sun and the outskirts forming the planets. (Kant had actually made a similar suggestion in the same book in which he spoke of island universes, but Laplace went into greater detail.)

Laplace thought he could strengthen the argument by pointing out an example of a star and planetary system actually in formation, and the Andromeda Nebula seemed tailor-made for that. There was the explanation for its glow. A star was beginning to shine at its center, and it illuminated the vast cloud of dust and gas that still surrounded and masked it. Telescopes could not resolve that cloud into separate stars because it didn't consist of separate stars. It was only one star, not yet fully formed.

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Because of his use of the Andromeda nebula as an example, Laplace's notion was called the "nebular hypothesis."

If Laplace were correct, then, the Andromeda nebula was not an incredible distance away, as was demanded by Kant's notion, but had to be quite close to us as, otherwise, so small an object as a single planetary system would not seem so large.

During the 19th century, the Andromeda nebula grew steadily less unusual. As the skies were searched with better and better telescopes, it turned out that there were quite a number of nebulas that were luminous and that yet showed no signs of stars on even the closest examination.

The Irish astronomer William Parsons, 3rd Earl of Rosse (1800-1867) paid particular attention to these nebulas and, in 1845, noted that a number of them seemed to have distinctly spiral structures, almost as though they were tiny whirlpools of light. The most spectacular example was one of the items on Messier's list — M51. It looked for all the world like a pinwheel and soon came to be known as the "Whirlpool nebula." Astronomers began to speak of "spiral nebulas" as a not uncommon class of objects in the sky.

As the 19th century progressed, it began to be possible to photograph the nebulas with long exposures so that more detail could be seen than by eye alone.

In the 1880's, a Welsh amateur astronomer, Isaac Roberts (1829-1904), took a large number of such photographs. In 1888, he was able to show that the Andromeda nebula had a spiral structure This had not been noted before because the Andromeda nebula was seen much more nearly edge-on than the Whirlpool nebula.

Roberts pointed out that if successive photographs of nebulas over a period of years showed changes that indicated they were rotating at a measurable speed, then they would have to be close by. Anything as far away as Kant's island universes would take millions of years to show measurable changes. In 1899, Roberts claimed to have seen rotational changes in his many photographs of the Andromeda nebula.

Also in 1899, the spectrum of the Andromeda nebula was taken for the first time, and it proved to have all the characteristics of starlight, which might indicate there was a developing star within it.

Between the claims that the Andromeda nebula was visibly rotating, and the fact of its star-like spectrum, the matter seemed settled. In 1909, the English astronomer William Huggins (1824-1910) insisted

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there was no further doubt that the Andromeda nebula was a planetary system in a late stage of development.

But one little point remained unsettled, and that was the matter of S Andromedae. This is a subject we will turn to next month.

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Vance Aandahl wrote "Born From the Beast" (August 1986). His new story concerns two female pro wrestlers who are thawed out in the year 2887 to undertake a desperate mission into the bowels of the Peoples Republic of Disneyland. Enough said?

Deathmatch In Disneyland

BY
VANCE AANDAHL

Swimmingly gave Bebop a slow slumberous nod and Bebop flashed Swimmingly a shiny chromium smile and together they slid into a mellifluous soulful improvisation on the music of the inner spheres with Swimmingly swaying back and forth and waving his laser clarinet around like he was shooting blowgun darts at butterflies and Bebop all hunched and scrunched over his ultrasizer wrist-dancing across the keyboard doo whop bopping every fingerpopping impulse yes amplifying and hyperflying and megasighing with a blue note here and an indigo chord there and the iridescent slip rip dipping woo doo tripping say boppa whoppa bobo buditten dotten oh yeah they were superfine those two rapturous old jazz-droids jamming up there on Charlie Parker Hill up there sweetly reedlipping and kneedipping and elbowflipping all those honeybark riffs all that neo-Mingus and counter-Coltrane — having sneaked out of the Body Dairy on the sly in defiance of the sonic wind.

Sonic wind?

Yes, sonic wind.

Beware, hepcats made of plastiplasm and titanium — beware the gale of noise that would rip you apart and send your cartilage bolts rolling across the land a hundred miles an hour.

"How about it, Doc? Am I the picture of health or am I?"

Nature Girl Nelson flexed one biceps, inflating it to the size of an eight-pound ham.

Dr. Huevos stared at her with cold trout eyes.

"I mean tell me, Doc — did I rewrite the medical record book or did

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I? Zero cholesterol, right? Body fat under 5 percent, right? Blood pressure couldn't be better over perfect, right? And check out my muscle mass."

Nature Girl made her biceps bounce, then gave Huevos a good-natured whack on the shoulder that almost knocked him to the floor. He straightened up and smiled nervously.

"I'm sorry, Miss Nelson."

He spoke in a solemn monotone.

"I'm sorry, but the fact is, you're dying."

Nature Girl stared down at his pie-shaped pasty white face. It took a few seconds for what he'd said to soak in. Then she threw back her head and roared with laughter.

"Dying of what, Doc? I'm the healthiest human being who ever lived. My body is a temple of good nutrition. How do ya think I won the title? It wasn't just size, strength, agility, meanness, and guts. It was natural food, too. I can put away five plates of broccoli and cauliflower at one sitting."

Dr. Huevos looked down at the carpet.

"That's just the problem, Miss Nelson. Your diet, I mean. A number of cases like yours have surfaced during the past few years, but yours is the worst I've ever seen. We call it. . . ."

The doctor conducted a lightning probe of both nostrils, then wiped the tip of his finger on his sleeve.

". . . vegerexia."

"Vegerexia? I never heard of it. You're kidding me, Doc."

"No, Miss Nelson. I'm afraid this isn't the make-believe world of professional wrestling. This is real. You've eaten too much broccoli and cauliflower, and now it's killing you."

"What the hell are you talking about, Doc? I eat loads of other vegetables, too, and a ton of nuts and fruits and grains."

"It isn't just broccoli and cauliflower, Miss Nelson. Okra, tangerines, Chinese snow peas, barley, sunflower seeds, Swiss chard, bananas, corn on the cob — they're all killers."

Dr. Huevos shook his head sadly.

"I just don't understand what makes you vegerexics tick. It's all so bizarre . . . so sick. . . ."

"Are you nuts, Doc? I feel great!"

"How you feel can be deceptive. Soon your skin will turn green. Not even a strict diet of Super Sugar Crisps can save you now, Miss Nelson. You're in the final stages of the disease."

"Oh yeah?" Nature Girl smirked at Dr. Huevos. "How much longer do I have, wise guy?"

He clucked like a mother hen and shook his head again.

"A few days. A week or two at the most."

Nature Girl felt the adrenaline rip through her body. She took a step forward and scowled at Huevos

"Maybe you don't know who the

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hell you're talking to, Doc, but I happen to be the official numero uno bona fide heavyweight champion of the Women's International All-Star Professional Wrestling Federation, and I've got the belt to prove it. I'm double-damn tough and double-damn mean. I don't appreciate having some bald little bush-league sawbones who thinks pro wrestling's make-believe try to scare me with a line of phony baloney about some nonexistent disease. Vegerexia? That's a laugh, Doc, but I don't need any jokes. What I need is for you to sign that goddamn Aspen City Council wrestling license so I can do my stuff tomorrow in the WTV 'Slaughter on the Slopes' special."

The doctor's face glistened with sweat. His lips were as gray and moist as garden slugs.

"I can't sign that license. You're dying. To certify good health in a —"

"What a crock of goat crap! You think just because I'm a pro wrestler, I'm so dumb I'll believe anything, don't you, Doc? You wanna know something, you repulsive little candy-ass? With that shiny bald head and that pale white complexion and that fat little body, you look more like Humpty Dumpty than a human being. Maybe I should give you a double vegematic body slam off the wall and see if you crack open."

"Please . . . please don't harm me. . . ."

Quailing, Huevos covered his face with his hands. Nature Girl flared her nostrils and snorted like a wild mare.

"Don't worry, Doc. I'm not gonna hurt ya. But I'll tell ya what I am gonna do. I'm gonna go to another doctor. Then I'm coming back here and showing you what he has to say, you sniveling geeky little dirtbag quack."

Dr. Huevos wiped his face with a hanky. Sweat was running down his neck in rivulets, soaking his collar. His voice trembled, but he spoke bravely.

"By all means, Miss Nelson. Do seek out a second opinion — and a third and a fourth. And when you finally realize I've told you the truth, do come back. You see, even though modern medicine cannot cure you, I and my associates offer another means by which you may yet save your life."

"Make yourself clear, Doc. What the hell are you getting at?"

"Cryogenic preservation, Miss Nelson."

Dr. Huevos's eyes took on a wolfish glint. He gave Nature Girl a warped little smile.

"We like to call it the Deep Freeze. . . ."

"Say, bro, I wouldn't wanna be anticopacetic, but I do believes I feels a breeze."

"I'm hip, my man. Let's pull in our axes and coast back down to the cool side of town."

Swimmingly popped open his wrist and slipped the laser clarinet

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away in his arm while Bebop folded up the ultrasizer into his chest. Down Charlie Parker Hill they ambulated, those wily old jazzdroids, their movements not quite human, too smoothly syncopated for flesh and blood.

The sonic wind grew noisier and noisier. In a few seconds they'd be swept away. But a jazzdroid has perfect timing. At the last second, Bebop and Swimmingly reached the low dome of the Body Dairy and hokey-pokeyed into its air lock.

Outside, a storm of noise scoured the lifeless landscape. It sounded like a Twisted Sister record played at a billion decibels.

Darkness.

Darkness and pain.

Every inch of Nature Girl's skin burned with pain. She was lying flat on her back. She opened her eyes, but all was still darkness.

What a lousy break, she thought. I can't see a damn thing. I must be knocked out. I bet Shari Martel rammed me into a turnbuckle. Or Susan Starr piledrivered me into the concrete apron.

She heard a creaking sound, and then a rectangle of brilliant light blasted her from above.

I'm not knocked out. I'm inside a box. Somebody's opening it.

Sensing danger, she hurled herself up and leapt out, arms raised and fingers spread, ready to deliver a claw grip to the face of anyone who dared to threaten her. The blood drained from her head, her knees dissolved, and she almost fainted.

What's going on? I feel so weak. . . .

Her vision swam with lazy swirls and sworls of carnival lights. Gradually a figure appeared before her, an old man wearing a dark blue uniform with a pair of golden arches stitched to the front. He was standing next to the box she'd just jumped out of. It looked like a supine refrigerator. Glancing around, she saw they were in the middle of warehouse filled with rows and rows of boxes just like it.

Somehow all this looks familiar. Have I been here before? She tried to concentrate, but the answers wouldn't come.

The old man must've been ninety. The top of his head shone like a cue ball. Around his ears hung a frizzy halo of orange hair. His face sagged with wrinkles.

"Welcome to the United States of McFree World, Nelson."

"Who are you? Where am I? What am I doing here?"

"Good questions, Nelson. I'm President McDonald, your commander in chief. This is Aardvark Station Three, an underground base located beneath the ruins of ancient Aspenopolis. The room we're in used to be a Body Dairy. You have been defrosted to undertake a secret mission — with the fate of the whole

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human race at stake."

Suddenly it all came back to Nature Girl. She'd gone back to Dr. Huevos after six other doctors confirmed his diagnosis. She remembered putting on her wrestling costume — her green plastic cabbage-leaf bikini and black leather boots — and lying down in one of his freezing chambers, shutting her eyes as the lid closed and the cold enveloped her.

"What year is this?"

"Brace yourself for a shock, Nelson. It's 2887."

"No lie? You're saying I've been on ice for nine centuries?"

"Affirmative, Nelson. But at last you've been thawed out. And why? To serve a great purpose, to fulfill your destiny, to save the McFree World from those damn metalheads!"

"Metalheads? What are you talking about? I had myself frozen because I'm dying of vegerexia. I need a cure."

"Never mind that, Nelson. Your personal problems aren't important now. Follow me."

President McDonald turned and hobbled down an aisle.

What a weirdo. The poor old guy must be senile. But I better stick with him till I figure out what's going on around here.

As he limped along, McDonald gestured at the rows of freezing chambers.

"Back in your day, Nelson, the slang term for these underground cryostorage repositories was the Deep Freeze, but we call them Body Dairies. An interesting experiment. Too bad it didn't work."

"Didn't work? I don't get it. If what you've told me is true, I've been kept alive for nine hundred years."

"Affirmative, Nelson. But you are a world champion professional wrestler endowed with superhuman size, strength, and agility, not to mention meanness and guts. These qualities make you a survivor. Others weren't so lucky. Take a look."

McDonald paused to open one of the chambers. Instantly a hideous reek filled the air. Gagging, Nature Girl pinched her nostrils shut and waved at him to close the lid. He slammed it down.

"Do I make myself clear, Nelson? The contents are in an advanced stage of decomposition. There's nothing left but a rancid, gelatinous mass of putrefaction."

He leaned over and read the label.

"This one used to be a science fiction writer. I guess he just didn't have any fight in him. Poor sonofabitch."

"You mean to tell me I'm the only one who survived?"

"You and the other pro wrestler, Nelson — a champ from the twenty-second century. Two out of 2 million. You'll be working together on the mission, so you better meet each other now. Follow me."

A champ from the twenty-second century? Nature Girl's mind did a

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double boggle at the prospect. That's two hundred years in the future! Except, two hundred years in the future is already seven hundred years in the past. . . .

McDonald led her down the aisle to a doorway, stepped through, and ushered her in. She found herself in a white anteroom.

"Nelson," he said, "meet the Divine Savagina."

Holy Hulk Hogan, thought Nature Girl.

There stood the most dangerous-looking woman she'd ever seen. The Divine Savagina was at least seven feet tall. She was wearing a metallic silver leotard with a crimson coffin nail emblazoned across the bodice. The cloth clung like a second skin to the curves of her voluptuous figure. Her beehive hairdo was silver, too, and so were her eyes. Striking features, but Nature Girl was staring at her stainless-steel fingernails.

"That's right, dear."

Savagina tossed Nature Girl a contemptuous sneer, then lifted her hands and leisurely raked the air.

"They're implants, dear. The better to rend you with. You see, I am not entirely human. Parts of me — how should I put it? — have been enhanced for combat. Call me cyborg."

This freak talks big, thought Nature Girl, but no bionic chorus girl is gonna put me down.

"I ain't your dear, you smart-ass bitch, and I'll tell ya what I think of your cute little nails. I think maybe you glued them on as a gimmick because you weren't tough enought to make it in the ring on your own natural talents."

"What about these, dear?"

Savagina curled back her lips to reveal a set of silver fangs. The light glittered wickedly off their razor-sharp points.

"And that's not all, dear. My muscles and ligaments are reinforced spandex, I have a Diehard heart, and believe me, you wouldn't want to powder your nose with one of my kneecaps. The grappling parties of the twenty-second century bear little resemblance to your wimpy twentieth-century version of the sport. You see, dear, we fight to the death."

Her voice had grown soft as silk, cold as ice.

"And I'm the champ."

"If you're so hot, how come you had yourself frozen?"

"Out of boredom, dear. My competition wasn't interesting. I hoped I might find a challenge in the future. Silly me — all I've found is a moronic stumblebum in a fig-leaf costume."

"Make that a cabbage leaf, Savagina!"

Springing forward, Nature Girl jackhammered an elbow into Savagina's solar plexus. The cyborg let out a whoosh of air and bent double at the waist. Before she could straighten up, Nature Girl grabbed her by the shoulders and ran her headfirst into the

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wall. With a sickening crunch, the sheetrock caved in.

"That's enough, Nelson!" snapped McDonald. "Save it for the metalheads!"

With a shudder, Savagina pulled her head out of the wall. Bits of plaster fell from her hair. She turned around, stood tall, and glared at Nature Girl out of eyes that glittered with rage.

"Really, dear. It's not nice to annoy the Divine Savagina."

She flicked her wrist. The steel fingernails shot out five inches like stiletto blades.

"You wouldn't want me to give you a facial with my retractables, would you, dear?"

"Come one step closer, you sleazy scumbag cyborg, and I'll break off those overgrown cuticles and stick 'em up your nose!"

"Girls!"

McDonald threw his rickety old body between them.

"The whole McFree World is counting on you! If you destroy each other—"

Before he could finish, the floor began to oscillate, jiggling him like a vibrator. The walls and ceiling shook wildly. An ear-piercing, brain-bruising whine filled the anteroom.

It's an earthquake, thought Nature Girl. Or a nuclear attack!

"Those goddamn metalheads!" roared McDonald. "They've turned on the Sonic Fan again!"

A door opened at the far end of the room, and the whine reached a deafening magnitude. It sounded like Ozzy Osbourne playing an electric guitar the size of Godzilla. Two figures wearing porkpie hats and sunglasses came slip-sliding in, then closed the door behind them. A moment later the noise-wind died away. In the sudden silence they boogie-woogied closer, their movements simultaneously jerky and smooth, their facial expressions the essence of enigmatic hip coolness.

"Say, bro, wig out on the chicks."

"I can dig it, my man. Let's lay down some licks."

Bebop and Swimmingly had arrived.

An hour later all five of them sat around an oval table in the Body Dairy's automat.

"So you see," said President McDonald, "the entire human race has been wiped out except for a few tribes of wind mutants who live in caves and two isolated pockets of civilization. One is the metalheads' headquarters, what they like to call the People's Republic of Disneyland. The other is Aardvark Station Three, where we are now, the last stronghold of the McFree World."

"It's hard to believe," said Nature Girl. "You say this wind machine these punk-rock robots have can hit any location on the planet?"

"They've blown it all to hell,"

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snapped McDonald. "The Sonic Fan is actually a giant sound system with the biggest set of tweeters and woofers in the world. When those goddamn metalheads focus Blue Oyster Cult or the Dead Kennedys on a target, the music comes at you so hard it doesn't just blow your socks off; it rips up sidewalks, scoops the water out of swimming pools, knocks down skyscrapers, and shoots cars down the street like marbles. The little bastards."

"It is hard to believe," said Savagina. "What's their energy source?"

"Disneyland itself. That's why they sacrificed everything to invade Southern Cal."

"I don't get it," said Nature Girl.

"Use your head, Nelson." McDonald gave her a sharp look. "Why do you think they call it the Magic Kingdom? Disneyland's powers of enchantment are the greatest force in the universe. The metalheads have enslaved those powers and perverted them to their own ends. They know we're here, somewhere in the Rockies. Every few hours they blast the area. We don't dare go out — none of us, that is, except these crazy jazzdroids. Somehow they can sense the sonic wind coming and always get back in time. But the rest of us are trapped. We're running low on food. Unless you knock that damn sound system out of commission, McDocracy is doomed."

"Why us?" asked Savagina.

"Who else? The last of our Armed McForces perished in November's suicide raid. I'm the only man left, and I'm not getting any younger. All I have to help me propagate the race is a single breeding herd of six females. They're in the Women's Center now, watching game shows on the wallscreen. We're defenseless. You're our last chance, our one remaining ray of hope."

"Whadya say, Savagina?"

"Really, dear — you and I working together?"

"Why not? I have a feeling we'd make one helluva tag team."

"What a wonderfully preposterous idea." Savagina laughed in Nature Girl's face. "I'll do it, dear — just to dispel my boredom, you understand."

"An excellent decision," said McDonald. "You girls won't regret your patriotism. But there's no time to waste. You must leave as soon as possible."

"Not so quick," said Nature Girl. "I have a few more questions first."

"Very well, Nelson. Shoot."

She looked intently at McDonald. Where had she seen that face before? It looked vaguely familiar with its age spots and puchy jowls and wispy horseshoe of orange hair.

"Before I risk my neck for ya, President McDonald, I'd like to know what your first name is."

"Good question, Nelson. The name's Ronald. But during national

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emergencies I go by the code name Rawheid."

"All right, Rawheid, here's another question. Disneyland's a thousand miles away. How are we gonna get there?"

"We have one remaining McHoverhopper. The jazzdroids will fly you there."

"That sounds dangerous. What if the Sonic Fan comes on while we're up in the air?"

"You're goners unless you can land the hopper and find a cave in thirty seconds."

"Great. Assuming we make it, precisely where in Disneyland is the Sonic Fan located?"

"We don't know. My guess is the Matterhorn, but it could be inside Space Mountain, the Haunted Mansion, anywhere really — even deep underground in the Pirates of the Caribbean. All we know for sure is that the outer perimeter of the park is bristling with defense systems. But don't worry about that now. We'll eat a meal to renew your strength, and then you'll be on your way."

McDonald hoisted himself out of his chair and walked haltingly to the Automat's service wall.

Bebop and Swimmingly had fallen asleep. Their heads hung at sharp angles like heads of puppets. Swimmingly was snoring in 8/8 time.

"This notion of yours that we should be a tag team is genuinely amusing," chuckled Savagina. "You know, dear, you'll just be extra baggage. I could do the job better by myself."

"We'll see, big mouth."

McDonald returned with a pair of trays. In front of Nature Girl, he set a wax-paper cylinder with a striped plastic straw in the top, a steaming cardboard sandwich box decorated with cartoons of clowns and pirates, and a cardboard boat with a multitude of greasy yellow passengers.

"Triple Macs on super-soft soy flour buns, nacho-flavored fries, and double-thick original white sugar shakes. Dig in, girls."

Nature Girl stared down at her meal in amazement. Nearly a thousand years have gone by, she thought. Everything has changed completely — everything except this.

"They used to serve the same kind of junk food back in the twentieth century," she complained. "Haven't there been any new developments?"

"Use your head, Nelson." McDonald's cheeks were bulging with fries. "The whole fabric of society would unravel if it weren't for a few institutions capable of lasting, of enduring, of staying unchanged over the centuries."

"Well, what about the U.S. Constitution? What about Christianity? What about —"

"Never heard of 'em. Don't worry about the past, Nelson — just eat."

"Listen, Rawheid, the only foods I eat are vegetables and fruits and grains

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and a few nuts and seeds. You can take this crap and —"

Suddenly Nature Girl noticed the backs of her hands. The skin revealed a faint greenish tinge.

Yikes ! I'm getting a chlorophyll complexion!

Grimacing, she opened her cardboard sandwich box, looked at the contents, and swallowed hard.

"Never mind. At this point I'll try anything — even a Triple Mac."

The sonic wind.

The wind that shreds, the wind that smashes. The wind of noise.

The dark voice of Disneyland.

Nature Girl stared out the mouth of the cave. Her jaw dropped and her eyes bulged. All she could see was a blur of motion; all she could hear was a high-pitched shriek. She wasn't sure, but it sounded like it might be the Sex Pistols or Frankie Goes to Hollywood. A two-ton boulder flew by like a spit wad.

The hopper's trashed, she thought grimly. And Disneyland's another fifty miles. How are we gonna get there?

Savagina stood next to her. With a flick of her wrist, she motioned for Nature Girl to follow her deeper into the cave.

Far back in the clammy darkness, they found Bebop and Swimmingly with their nostril lights on. The howl of the wind faded behind them. Silence filled the cave.

"It's stopped blowing," said Savagina. She turned to the jazzdroids. "Be a pair of darlings. Go outside and locate your vehicle."

"Or what's left of it," muttered Nature Girl.

"Girl girl girl," said Bebop, flashing one small fraction of the ultimate goofball smile. He closed his eyes and rolled his head around on his shoulders as though his neck were broken.

"Bebop, my man," said Swimmingly. "I mean Bebop. Say Bebop. I mean say Bebop, my man." He took Bebop by the arm and led him up toward the mouth of the cave.

As the jazzdroids' nostril lights departed, Nature Girl was enveloped in sudden darkness. She couldn't see Savagina, but she sensed the cyborg's presence. They stood close to each other, not speaking. All Nature Girl could hear was the drip drip dribble of water from somewhere deep in the cave. Then she heard Savagina's breath, and felt it, a soft, warm exhalation that played across her ear and throat.

"You really let me have it this morning. You laid right into me. I didn't frighten you at all, did I? I like that in a woman."

She paused, then whispered directly into Nature Girl's ear.

"You know, dear, having you for a partner might be interesting after all. Very interesting indeed."

Shit, thought Nature Girl. On top of everything else, Savagina's a dyke. Now I know why she kept eyeballing

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me in the hopper.

She felt the cyborg's fingertips brush her bare shoulders. The cold touch of the stainless steel nails made her skin tingle.

"Knock it off, leadlips, or I'll lay into you again — this time so hard you'll wish your head was still stuck in that wall."

"You're a hot-tempered little spitfire, aren't you, dear?" Savagina ran her hands caressingly over Nature Girl's shoulders. "I love a woman with spirit."

Nature Girl flung the cyborg's arms away and took two steps back in the darkness.

"Hands off, Savagina. I don't play around with other broads. I go for men, real men, men like Andre the Giant and Big John Stud."

"You don't understand, dear. All the cyborgs in the 2200 series come fully equipped with an adjustable androgynous genital assembly. With the penile unit I've got, you'll soon forget all about your so-called real men."

"You creepy scumbag! You make me puke! If this was the good old U.S.A. instead of the goddamn McFree World or whatever the hell they call it, you'd be in Leavenworth right now, locked up with the rest of the pervs and porn freaks instead of running around—"

Before she could finish, a cacophony of subhuman cries and screeches echoed through the cave. Something like a heavy blanket fell across her head and shoulders, knocking her to the floor of the cave. She surged to her feet, then fell again, her arms and legs tangled in the folds of a net. Struggling to rip it apart, she rolled wildly back and forth. At the same time, someone — or something —began to drag her jerkily down the slope of the cave.

"Savagina! Are you still there?"

"Yes, dear," came a cool voice. "I succeeded in exterminating a few of them, but I'm afraid they have me now."

"Them? They? Who the hell are—"

Nature Girl's head took a bad bounce, and she blacked out in midsentence.

She came to in a dizzy pinwheel of pain. A goose egg on the side of her head was throbbing angrily: How much time had passed she couldn't say, but now she was bound in ropes, wrapped up from head to foot like a mummy or a cocoon. Her captors had set her on a flat rock, propped up back to back with Savagina.

"Jitterbuggin' Jerry Blackwell!"

"You're awake. That's nice. For a while I thought you might sleep through the whole party."

"What's going on? Where are we?"

"See for yourself, dear."

A vast cavern surrounded them, its recesses dimly lit by phosphorescent stalactites and stalagmites. Nature Girl saw shadowy figures shuf-

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fling through the eerie blue twilight, bobbing and swaying, circling the rock where she and Savagina sat. The figures looked only vaguely human. Silky blue hair hung in soft waves off their bodies. Their eyes were a ghastly Moby Dick white, with no irises or pupils. They clutched rulers in their hands, and some of them were gnawing on bones.

"Wind mutants. . . ."

"That's right, dear. They've gone blind hiding underground. All they have to eat are a few fungi and each other. Those are human bones they're chewing on."

"Cannibals! And now there's something new on the menu." Nature Girl gulped. "Us."

"I'm afraid you're right, dear."

One of the mutants moved closer to the rock. Waving a ruler in the air, his eyes blank white, he performed a grotesque soft-shoe dance in front of Nature Girl. Little squeals of pleasure came from his lips. He burbled and cooed, then chanted in a mewing falsetto:

We are your teachers
and this is your school
and when you arrive
our mouths run with drool.
Soon we will teach you
that day is night,
that death is nourishment
and darkness light.
Round you in circles
the dreamteachers dance
to feed on your flesh
in a magic trance.

The other mutants joined in, filling the cavern with their squealy voices:

We'll chew on your toes
till we're down to the bones
then flunk you in conduct
for your groans and moans.

The foremost dreamteacher edged closer, reaching out with the fingers of one hand while brandishing his ruler in the other. Nature Girl noticed the metal edge of the ruler had been notched into a serrated blade.

"They're gonna saw us up into hors d'oeuvres an inch at a time," she said. "What a lousy way to go."

"Hors d'oeuvres? Congratulations, dear — I didn't think your vocabulary included words like that."

"How the hell can you make wisecracks at a time like this?"

"Why not? We're not pâté on crackers yet, dear. If you'll just stop squirming and sit still, maybe I can finish snipping through these ropes with my nails. I've almost got my right arm loose."

"Hey, all right! Way to go! But hurry!"

The dreamteacher was crouching over Nature Girl's right foot. He fingered her big toe as though it were a sausage. As he positioned the blade of the ruler to saw off the toe, a strand of drool yo-yoed off his chin.

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Then the opening bars of "Take Five" came drifting through the air.

Nature Girl lifted her head and glanced wildly around. On the far side of the cavern, she spotted Bebop and Swimmingly silhouetted against the phosphorescent blue glow of a stalagmite garden. They were playing their instruments with cool intensity. Swimmingly stood with his head tipped back, pointing his laser clarinet straight up. Bebop's hands danced across the ultrasizer, a blur of keyboard action like a slapstick doubletime sequence in a silent movie.

"Do I hear our faithful jazzdroids, dear?"

"You sure do! I think they're trying to rescue us!"

"Rescue us? Really, dear. How could those absurd walking music boxes possibly—"

"See for yourself, smart-ass!"

Nature Girl felt a rope or two loosen as Savagina twisted around to take a look.

"How clever of them, dear. I understand now — music hath charms to soothe the savage beast."

The head dreamteacher had turned away from Nature Girl's toe. One by one the others stopped dancing. They stared blindly in the direction of the jazzdroids' jam session. Their mouths fell open. Groping forward with their hands, they shuffled toward the stalagmite garden.

"Wouldja look at those dummies. They're hypnotized."

"Yes, dear. But when the music stops, the spell will be broken and they'll recover their appetites soon enough, I wager. It's time to depart."

"Make a break for it? But what about Bebop and Swimmingly? We can't just leave them here. We —"

"We, dear?"

A sudden jerk nearly knocked Nature Girl off the rock. A moment later, Savagina stood before her, gazing down with a triumphant glint in her silver eyes.

"I was referring to myself, dear. You can do whatever you please."

"Wait a second! Don't take off now — I'm still tied up!"

"That's your problem, dear."

Savagina retracted her fingernails and brushed away a few strands of rope.

"You told me hands off, remember? I know when I'm not wanted. Bye-bye, dear — I'm off to Disneyland."

"Howya plan to get there, you snotty lesbo bitch? Take a bus?"

"Goodness, dear — such language. Once I locate the wreckage of the hopper, it should be a simple task to salvage one of the antigrav propellers and harness it to my back."

"But . . . but. . . ."

"I warned you, dear. I told you you'd just be extra baggage. There's no point whining about it — you've slowed me down far too much already. All farewells should be sudden. *Sayonara.*"

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The Divine Savagina swung around, wiggled her ass provocatively in Nature Girl's face, and strutted off through the stalagmites.

You don't know the way out, Nature Girl told herself, but she does. You better get out of these ropes fast. But how? Maybe now's the time to see if Sergeant Slaughter's basic training is worth its salt.

Savagina's nails had frayed and weakened some of the ropes that bound Nature Girl. To burst them apart would not be impossible. She concentrated on a mental image of the mighty sergeant expanding his chest with a deep breath, then flexed her own chest to the max.

The ropes exploded like firecrackers. Bits of hemp flew in all directions. Springing off the rock, she stretched her limbs and shook free her wild mane of strawberry blonde hair. She felt like a champion again.

On one side of the cavern, Bebop and Swimmingly were surrounded by a close circle of dreamteachers. The mutants appeared to be enchanted by "Take Five." They were snapping their fingers, clapping their hands, tapping out the rhythm with their rules. But "Take Five" doesn't last forever. Swimmingly lifted one arm and waved at Nature Girl to make tracks.

On the other side of the cavern, Savagina was scrambling up a steep slope of shale and gravel. A moment later she disappeared into the gloom.

That's where the tunnel to the surface must be. Feet, do your stuff!

Nature Girl took off like a grizzly on amphetamines. Running up the incline, she kicked so hard her boots sent half a ton of scree and talus screaming down behind her. When she reached the top, she saw the tunnel and plunged into it. There was no phosphorescence here, only pitch-black darkness. She paused for a second. Not far ahead she could hear the rapid clatter of Savagina's footsteps.

She's running full speed! Cyborgs must be able to see in the dark. Well, it won't do her any good — sooner or later I'll catch her, and when I do, I'll make her whimper for mercy like Bobby Heenan.

Nature Girl resumed her pursuit, sprinting recklessly through the darkness. Her legs told her she was moving up, but she couldn't see a thing. She barked her shin, stumbled sideways, caught her toe, slammed into the side of the tunnel, and staggered to a halt. For a moment she could hear the faint sound of Savagina's footsteps disappearing in the distance. Then silence was all.

You wanna catch that sleazy bitch so bad you don't care if you kill yourself doing it. That makes a lot of sense, doesn't it? Slow down and use your head.

Something warm and sticky was dripping off her eyebrows and trickling down the side of her nose. She'd cut her forehead. Wiping the blood from her eyes, she took stock of her

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condition. Her body was covered with rope burns, bruises, and abrasions. The goose egg on the side of her head still throbbed with pain. She was dizzy and nauseated and weak. Her muscles felt limper than Brutus Beefcake's T-shirt after a cage match with the British Bulldogs.

What's wrong with me? My strength came back when I broke those ropes, but now it's gone again. Even if I do catch Savagina, I won't have a chance against her.

Gritting her teeth, Nature Girl continued up the incline at a slower pace. After a while her sense of time became disoriented, and she couldn't tell whether she'd been proceeding through the darkness for a minute or an hour. Then her sense of direction grew confused, too, and even her sense of gravity. Was she progressing up a single tunnel toward the light of day or lost in a labyrinth of numerous crooked passages, doomed to wander up and down and round and round till she collapsed and died in the gloom? One moment her body seemed to float; the next it grew heavy and sank. Doubts and fears swam through her mind. Every step was a struggle.

With a groan of frustration, Nature Girl sank to her knees and lay shuddering on the clammy stone.

What does it matter? If I stay down here, I'll starve to death or get eaten by the dreamteachers; but if I find my way to the surface, I'll just get blown to shreds the next time the metalheads turn on their Sonic Fan. Who cares anyway? The twenty-ninth century stinks.

You stink, too. You're a fake and you know it. Your whole life has been one great big lousy lie. You're as phony as the rhinestone diamonds on that championship belt you're so damn proud of. Nature Girl and her cabbage-leaf bikini — it's all just an illusion, an artificial persona created by some unscrupulous advertising executive to milk a little more money out of the mindless mob of pro wrestling fans. Where's the real me? What happened to Nancy Nelson?

She'd never felt so depressed. Curling up in the fetal position, she lay on her side and wept, her whole body wracked with heaving sobs, her brain dancing with images of her lost innocence — the pink and white heart-shaped cake she'd helped Mommy bake for Valentine's Day when she was five, the bright blue Schwinn Daddy had helped her ride wobblingly up and down the sidewalk on her eighth birthday, the shaking of her knees during her oboe solo in the Purvis Middle School talent show, the kiss Bobby Dunlap had bestowed on her astonished lips the night of the junior prom. She remembered her basset hound Clancy. She remembered family breakfasts on Sunday morning — always a big meal in the Nelson household, a good old-fashioned breakfast with orange juice and cantaloupe and country-fried potatoes

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and oatmeal and toast. And homemade grape jelly for the toast. These visions blurred together into a hallucinogenic montage of faraway colors and sounds, and then she slept.

When she awoke, her body felt even weaker than before, but her mind was galvanized with a powerful new resolve. She rose instantly to her feet and moved on through the darkness, searching always for the steepest incline. A breeze wafted across her face. Working her way around a hairpin turn, she looked up and saw an eye of light ahead of her. A moment later she stood in brilliant sunshine at the mouth of the cave, squinting out at the barren landscape.

She heard a whirring sound above her in the sky. A tiny silver figure flew by about two hundred feet overhead. Even at that distance, Nature Girl could see the smirk on the cyborg's face.

"Savagina!" she shouted. "You're not the only one who can strap a propeller on her back! I'm comin' after ya!"

When she lifted her arm to shake her fist, Nature Girl gasped. The whole arm had turned green. She looked down at herself. The rest of her was green, too, a bright but unhealthy-looking green like the color of squished grasshopper's guts.

No wonder I'm so weak — I'm in the final stages of vegerexia!

She remembered what Dr. Huevos had said: "When your skin turns a bright but sickly green, you'll have only a few hours left."

She could still see the twinkle of malice in his eye.

To hell with him! So what if I look like the Jolly Green Giant's wife! I didn't quit when Velvet McIntyre had my neck twisted in the ropes, and I ain't quittin' now!

Far away on the lifeless plain, she saw a heap of wreckage where the sonic wind had deposited the McHoverhopper. With a drunken lurching gait, she set off toward it. But she hadn't gone five steps when her knees turned to Reddi Whip and she pitched forward into a sea of oblivion.

She'd been falling forever, falling down an immensely deep elevator shaft or mine shaft or Mayan human-sacrifice well — she couldn't tell which because it was pitch-black, and all she could hear was the air whistling as she fell faster and faster, and what scared her the most was that she knew she would hit the bottom before she saw it; and then the darkness dilated into an eye of light and she wasn't falling down into death but bouncing up out of it, soaring back up into fresh air and sunshine of life.

"Mark you, m'lord — her breath quickeneth and her eyelids fluttereth like an L.L. Bean tie on a gusty day."

"Verily, varlet — she doth awaken

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from her long sleep. Spankingly now — begone!"

The darkness dissolved. Nature Girl realized she was lying on her back in a waterbed. Blinking, she looked up at the handsomest man she'd ever seen.

His straw-colored hair was feather-trimmed in a conservative Kennedy cut, neither too long nor too short. His brow was broad and intelligent, his eyes the preternatural blue of a New Zealand lake, his nose modestly aquiline, his mustache perfectly groomed, his smile gentle yet self-confident, his chin dimpled yet strong. He was wearing a Land's End heather and maize basketcable cardigan of Welsh lamb's wool with leather buttons, a pair of wrinkly old canvas beach pants with roll-up cuffs, and Birkenstock sandals.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I am Whitney Browne-Lamshire, Lord High Chairman of the board of the nouvelle subterraneans, but I beseech thee to call me Whit."

Whit's voice was softer than an avocado blender on low. He leaned over the bed and looked deeply into her eyes. Nature Girl's heart skipped a beat.

"And thou, enchanting stranger? By what sweet nomenclature shall I know thee?"

"Nature Girl," she said. "Nature Girl Nelson."

"Nature Girl Nelson," he repeated, rolling the words around on his tongue, savoring each syllable. "A most pleasing name — a name sweeter than carob tofutti with kiwi fruit conserve."

"Where are we?"

Glancing around, Nature Girl saw on one wall a Navajo rug and on another an abstract weaving that looked vaguely like an exploding unicorn. A rowing machine sat like a giant metallic cricket in the middle of a plush mauve carpet, surrounded by three ecru futons. The room was illuminated by a pair of brass gooseneck lamps with shades of dusty grape velvet fringed with peacock tassels. Somewhere in the background she could hear a CD of Andreas Vollenweider's *White Winds*.

"What sort of place is this? It looks god-awful."

"Fear not, fair Nature Girl. Thou resteth now in the guest room of the royal townhouse of my underground kingdom, Anaheim Grotto Estates, safe from all harm."

This assurance triggered a synapse in Nature Girl's brain, and she lifted her hand to inspect the color of her skin. The sickly green was gone. Her pigmentation had restored itself to its normal robust salmon pink.

"I was dying of vegerexia, but now I feel well again! Who found me? Who brought me here? Who cured me? Am I really cured? What's going on?"

"Sloweth down, my dear bewildered damsel. One query at a time.

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Firstly, it was our Volvo border battalion that happened upon thee by happy happenstance in the course of a rare surface patrol. Secondly, it was Seymour the Assertive, my foremost administrative assistant and Chamberlain of Racquetball, who spirited thee here by BMW ambulance along our cunning network of underground freeways. Thirdly, it was I myself who summoned from the royal holistic health center the team of eating disorder specialists who've treated thee, most assiduously feeding thee crumbs of Brie and sips of wine cooler whilst applying leeches to thy earlobes — the only known cure for the Green Death. Their treatment having proven its worth, we rejoiceth in the restoration of thy health."

Nature Girl knew it was true. She still felt limp, but inside her body, wellsprings of vitality were bubbling merrily up. With a surge of energy, she rolled out of the waterbed and stood tall, beaming down into Whitney Browne-Lamshire's face.

"Normally I don't care much for yuppies, Whit, but you're a good joe. What can I do to thank ya for saving me?"

Whit gazed up at her with a smile that was manly yet contained, just like Robert Redford in *Out of Africa*. Nature Girl's heart throbbed like a broken toe. The innermost essence of her womanhood turned all soft and gooshy like a chocolate-covered cherry melting on a hot sidewalk. What a dreamboat, she thought. And I love the way he talks.

"Ah," sighed Whit, "dare I say it? For three days and nights have I watched over thee, my slumberous beauty, and thou hast stolen my poor trembling heart away. Rather wouldst I cast down in the gutter my finest Pendleton shirt than seest thou step in a puddle."

He sank to one knee and clasped her hands in his.

"To thee I plight my troth, beloved Nature Girl. Wouldst thou be my lady?"

"Who? Me? I don't get it, Whit. No one else ever talked to me like this. I mean, I ain't exactly the delicate flower type, and —"

"Thou understandth not," he cried in a plaintive voice. "Among the nouvelle subterraneans it is not the timid lily who claimeth honor and kindleth desire in the bosoms of men, nay, but rather she who prevaileth at cross-country skiing, the iron-person triathalon, and the twelve-hundred-mile dogsled race. When first I layeth eyes on thee, exquisite giantess, astonished was I to apprehend thy size. As thou did battle with the Green Death, doubly astonished was I to witness thy strength and meanness and guts." His blue eyes glowed with adoration. "And I can just imagineth thy agility."

"Jeez," whispered Nature Girl. "You're the first guy who's ever proposed to me. And what's more, you love me for my best qualities."

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Whit rose from his genuflection, stood on the tips of his toes, took Nature Girl lightly in his arms, and kissed her.

Holy Hercules Hernandez! I hope I don't faint. . . .

But somehow something was wrong. Whit did everything a good kisser should, but his lip work seemed wooden, his tongue thrusts perfunctory. Instead of enflaming Nature Girl's passion, he doused it.

So this is how yuppies kiss. A lot of cold technique but no fire at all. I should've realized right away — this guy's too good to be true.

She pulled away with a sloppy little popping sound. It triggered another synapse in her brain, and she jumped so abruptly she almost knocked Whit over.

"Sufferin' Superfly Snuka! I almost forgot! I can't marry you, Whit, or even stay here and get to know ya better — at least not right now. I've got a mission to fulfill!"

"Sayeth thou a mission?"

"I gave my word, Whit. The whole McFree World is counting on me. I've gotta knock out the metalheads' Sonic Fan."

"Ah — now the light dawneth. Thou speaketh of the overworld."

"You got it, Whit. I need to make it back up there fast. You said something about underground freeways. How close can ya take me to Disneyland?"

Whitney Browne-Lamshire tossed her an ironic smile, then reached up to touch her cheek. It was a tender gesture but also a mechanical one — strictly by the book.

"At this very moment, my infatuation, we standeth directly beneath Sleeping Beauty Castle. Thy humble swain can conveyeth theee not just *close* to Disneyland but verily *into* Disneyland."

"Great! Let's go!"

"But wherefore? Here in Anaheim Grotto Estates, we possesseth everything thou couldst possibly desire. Through the subtle employment of modified tanning lamps, our malls, boutiques, and emporiums are illuminated bright as day. Our snack bars and restaurants are veritable cornucopias overflowing with sushi, cashew salads, and croissants. Tax-sheltered investments aboundeth. M'lady — I offer thee a life of mindless materialism punctuated by sweet bursts of ecstasy in the arms of the most loving Chairman of the Board."

"Listen, Whit," growled Nature Girl. "Back when I was lost in the dreamteachers' cave, I almost got pinned by self-doubt and existential dread. A tough tag team. Half of me felt like giving up, but the other half wouldn't. I'm no quitter. And I'm not about ready to give up now just because some fast-talking smooth mover thinks he can tempt me with the so-called finer things in life. If you were half the man you say you are, you'd recruit a few of your Volvo

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border battalions or whatever the hell ya call 'em and help me kick those metalheads' ass. They'll turn the whole planet into a wasteland if we don't shut down their goddamn Sonic Fan, and I mean right now. What do ya say, Whit? Will ya back me up?"

His face turned white as a moldy mozzarella.

"But m'lady, what transpireth in the overworld is no concern of ours. We nouvelle subterraneans —"

"You nouvelle subterraneans are a bunch of yellow-bellied pantywaists with less balls than Boy George and about as much backbone as an earthworm on 'ludes! I can see you ain't gonna be no help in a scrap, pal, so let's not waste any more time flappin' our lips. If you really do have a way to sneak me into Disneyland, it's gonna be now, not next week."

"But m'lady — I imploreth thee. . . ."

"I said NOW!"

A tiny whimper sounded in the back of Whitney Brown-Lamshire's throat. His eyes grew moist.

"Very well, then." He turned and shouted hoarsely through a doorway. "Varlet! Come quickly, thou clumsy fool!"

Instantly a figure appeared in the doorway, a young man wearing a navy blazer with a pewter and mushroom Shantung silk tie and khaki twill trousers.

"Yes, m'lord?"

"Varlet, I command thee to conducteth Lady Nelson to the overworld, most expeditiously and with great dispatch."

"Spankingly, m'lord?"

"Yes! Spankingly! Forthwith! Pronto! Now!"

Nature Girl took a step toward the doorway, paused, then looked back at Whit.

"I guess I shouldn't have chewed you out like that just because you're a lover, not a fighter. After all, you did save my life. Besides—"

"Enough!" he cried melodramatically, throwing his arm across his face to shield his eyes with the sleeve of his cardigan. "Torment me no more, cruel enchantress!" He spun around, hurled himself onto the waterbed, and lay there shuddering and sobbing into the pillow.

What a pansy, thought Nature Girl. He's worse than Adorable Adrian Adonis.

With a brisk stride, she followed the scurrying varlet through Whitney Browne-Lamshire's royal townhouse, a grand collocation of staircases, halls, high-ceilinged rooms that might have sprung full-blown from the pages of *GQ* or *Better Homes and Gardens*. Her guide pulled open a mahogany door, and she stepped out into a capacious and brightly lit tunnel, wide enough to accommodate two lanes of motor traffic and an asphalt bike path teeming with joggers clad in garish pink and orange Gore-Tex. Looking down

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the tunnel in both directions, Nature Girl saw a succession of passageways, alcoves, and intersecting side tunnels.

Larrupin' Larry Zbyszko! Pretty Boy wasn't joking. There's a whole city down here — and no one in the McFree World knows this place even exists.

She'd followed the varlet along the bike path for less than a minute, when they came to a niche in the tunnel marked "Emergency Egress."

"A plethora of pardons, Lady Nelson, but in the absence of an escalator, thou must climbeth by hand and foot into the outerworld."

Groveling, he gestured toward an iron ladder that ran up the niche through an opening in the ceiling.

"How far is it to the surface?"

"I knoweth not, Lady Nelson. There hath never been an emergency in Anaheim Grotto Estates, wherefore no one hath ever climbed the ladder."

"Aw, c'mon. I bet somebody tries it once in a while just to see what's up there. You know, just to have an adventure, just for the fun of it."

The varlet shook his head in puzzlement.

"Zounds! What a quaint idea. Forgive my foolish frankness, most effulgent Lady Nelson, but obviously thou understandeth not the ways of the nouvelle subterraneans."

"You can say that again. See ya later, Briebreath."

Nature Girl climbed up the rungs of the ladder through the opening in the ceiling into the gloom of an unlit vertical shaft. As she ascended, the shaft seemed to narrow, closing in around her, growing darker and darker till she was enveloped in total blackness. Little spots of red light danced near the corner of her left eye. Somewhere in the distance she could hear what sounded like a clothes dryer — a faint rumbling hum, the metallic tap tap tap of zippers and buttons against the surface of a spinning drum.

The darkness tightened around her, swarming with scintillas of red light, surreal, disorienting, the undecipherable lifeblood of delusion. Each time she reached up to grasp another rung, beads of sweat trickled down her wrist and her heart pounded with exertion — but was she really climbing the ladder, or did she merely imagine she was climbing it? Was the darkness a true absence of light, or just the inky fluid of her mind, a shadowy subconscious hallucination, a dream within a dream?

Get a grip on yourself. Just a little farther and you'll be there.

But how far was just a little farther? How far had she already climbed? A hundred feet? Five hundred? A thousand? Suddenly she saw herself dangling from a helicopter above a dense jungle. A strange man in a strange green uniform was kicking at her hands, cursing at her in a strange language she scarcely understood, trying to make her let go and drop to

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her death because of something he thought she'd done, some betrayal she didn't comprehend.

But no, she wasn't falling; she was climbing — climbing slowly, climbing surely, climbing even higher, a creature from the Earth's molten core working her way up through solid rock. She reached for the next rung, and her fingertips scraped against a wooden surface. She pushed up, and it lifted, blasting her eyes with a brilliant explosion of light.

It's a trapdoor! I've made it to the top!

Squinting, tipping back her head, she paused for a moment to let the light play across her face. Then she threw back the trapdoor and scrambled up to meet her destiny.

To her right, a huge pyramid of Davy Crockett coonskin caps with pendulous tails of artificial fur. To her left, rack after rack of Donald Duck T-shirts, each irascible waterfowl attired in blue sailor's garb and surrounded by a radiant yellow aureole. Behind her, a mountain of Mickey Mouse ears, arcane protuberances, the black dish antennae of some unfathomable alien technology. Before her, an endless succession of glass display cases jam-packed with Bambi books and Goofy galoshes and Mary Poppins panties and Pinocchio condoms. Yes, thought Nature Girl, yes. I'm here at last. Reverently she gazed up at the neon sign hanging overhead, winking out its message in pink and green: "Tinker Bell Toy Shoppe."

She was standing in the back. Little family groups of shoppers strolled up and down the aisles, perusing the merchandise, their features blurred by the bright fluorescent lights, their voices an indistinct murmur under the piped-in sound track from *Cinderella.*

Must be metalheads! Duck down outta sight, dummy!

Crouching behind a stack of Winnie-the-Pooh potty chairs, Nature Girl waited for her eyes to adjust to the light, then peered cautiously down the nearest aisle. The closest shopper was bending over a glass case to inspect a display of silver-plated Cap'n Hook handguns.

If he's a punk-rock robot, I'll eat my cabbage-leaf bikini. But if he isn't, then what the hell *is* he?

The shopper's physique seemed vaguely anthropomorphic, but he wasn't human. His round head sported round black ears, not to mention a round black nose, all of this roundness perched atop a roly-poly body from which protruded the abnormally thin arms and legs of an Ethiopian famine victim. He was wearing red Bermuda shorts with big yellow buttons, a pair of white gloves with only three fingers, and yellow shoes. He flashed a manic smile and spoke in a high-pitched squeaky voice:

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"Hey, Minnie, c'mon! Take a look at this swell .44 Magnum!"

Rowdy Roddy Piper! It's a man-sized version of Mickey Mouse! But . . . but. . . .

But something was terribly wrong. The mouseman lacked symmetry and organic wholeness. None of his parts matched. His arms appeared to be of different lengths. One ear stuck straight out, thick and fleshy, while the other hung limp, a discolored membrane of lifeless tissue. As he stepped back to view the handguns from a different angle, his left leg dragged and jerked, the muscles twitching spastically, out of sync with each other. Even his eyes clashed: one bulging, the other a puffy slit. His entire anatomy was disproportionate, deformed, grotesquely out of balance with itself. And at each of his joints, Nature Girl could see a multitude of seams and stitches, crude purplish surgical scars.

He's been sewn together like Frankenstein's monster!

The mouseman's wife joined him. A pair of mousebrats clung to her skirts, whining for ice cream. All the other shoppers were mousepeople, too, each one a nightmarish assemblage of disparate organs, the hideous creation of some demented vivisectionist, some latter-day Dr. Moreau with Disneyphilia and a sharp scalpel. The sight nauseated Nature Girl. She'd never witnessed anything so perverted, so unnatural, so depraved.

Too stunned to feel fear, she rose up from her hiding place and walked numbly down the aisle. One or two of the mousepeople gave her a curious glance, but none spoke or tried to stop her. A moment later she stepped out into the full dazzling warmth of the southern California sunshine.

Hoppin' Hoss Funk! They're everywhere!

Fantasyland teemed with mousepeople. Mouseteens squealed with excitement as they soared and dipped on Dumbo's wings and spun in vicious tight orbits in the Mad Hatter's teacups. Mouseseniors by the thousand stood in line like Auschwitz victims, their shoulders sagging, their eyes downcast, waiting to mount the King Arthur Carousel, to wander with Alice through Wonderland, to flee with Snow White into the depths of the dark forest, to fly over London with Peter Pan and Wendy, to careen wildly down a quiet country road in Mr. Toad's motor car. Mousebabies howled and bawled, their little faces streaked with cotton candy and orange pop. Mousemothers snapped at them to shut up. Mousefathers snarled and gnashed their teeth. A rich aroma of hot dogs, popcorn, and burritos washed through the air but could not fully conceal the pervasive subliminal undercurrent of vomit and disinfectant. The noise of the crowd mingled with half a dozen insipid saccharine musical sound tracks to create an incredibly discordant ca-

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cophony that pierced Nature Girl's ears and afflicted her brain with an instant migraine headache of Brobdingnagian magnitude. Nine long centuries after its inception, the Happiest Place in the World had lost not a whit of its special charm.

Dazed, Nature Girl wandered aimlessly through the milling mob. Though she towered over them, none of the mousepeople gave her a second look. She circled a Dixieland band of mousemusicians, stepped aside for a throng of camera-laden Japanese mousetourists, and was heading down Main Street in a stupor of sensory overload, when a figure strode out of the shadows and stood before her, legs spread, arms akimbo, blocking her path — an unmistakable figure, seven feet tall, with silver eyes and a curling sneer on her not-quite-human lips.

"Savagina!"

"That's right, dear. How clever of you to remember my name."

"Don't get smart with me. What's going on? Who the hell are all these overgrown rodents?"

"Overgrown rodents? Oh, I see — you mean my little automousons."

With a sweep of her arm, Savagina gestured around her.

"They're my people, dear. My subjects. My slaves."

"Automousons? I don't get it. President McDonald said —"

"President McDonald is a fool!"

"But where are the metalheads?"

"There are no metalheads, dear. Only automousons. Eighty-seven thousand, four hundred and twelve automousons. And all of them are mine to use as I please. . . ."

Savagina's voice trailed off into a deranged chortle. Her eyes glittered like chips of frozen vodka.

Uncle Elmer save us, thought Nature Girl. She's crazier than Mad Dog Vachon!

"I still don't understand. These automousons — they've been sewn together. Who did it? Someone must've —"

"That's right, dear. The same someone who's been blasting everything with wind. But don't worry — I took care of him three days ago, when I shut down his Sonic Fan. He won't bother us anymore. I'm in charge now."

"But Savagina —"

"Silence! Henceforth you must show your respect by addressing me as the *Divine* Savagina and curtsying with your head bowed. In fact, dear, if you're fond of breathing, I suggest you get down on your hands and knees and kiss each one of my little silver toenails."

The sunshine's warmth fled from Nature Girl's shoulders, and the world around her grew dark. She glanced up. A deep purple thunderhead was coming in off the Pacific. The roily mass of clouds had covered the sun and was rolling forward fast, blotting out the sky overhead.

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Looks like Mother Nature's out to show that Sonic Fan a trick or two. Maybe I should do the same for Savagina.

"Listen up, you kinky bucket of nuts and bolts — I'd rather kiss Precious Paul Ellering's ass than come within ten feet of your toes. And if you think you're tough enough to *make* me, you're in for a quick education at Nature Girl Nelson's college of knowledge. The last time we scrapped, I was dying of vegerexia and still rammed your head through a wall. Now that I'm cured, I'll reach down your throat and pull out your lungs. How do ya think I won the title? It wasn't just size, strength, agility, meanness, and guts. It was also natural food, smooth moves, the will to win, good old-fashioned American determination, and a tendency to go berserk whenever my opponent pisses me off. I'm the one and only heavyweight champion of the Women's International All-Star Professional Wrestling Federation, and I've got a heavy leather rhinestone belt to prove it. I'm double-damn tough and double-damn mean. Mess with me, you platinum pervert, and I'll make you hurt so bad you'll think you got eaten by a lion and shit off a cliff."

"Are you suggesting we engage in personal combat? How crude and primitive. Back in the twenty-second century, I was the very best, of course, but I've left all that behind me. It's below my dignity now that I'm the absolute master and ruler of the whole Earth. I have other ways of putting you in your place, dear."

Savagina was gripping what appeared to be a TV remote control. She held it up for Nature Girl to see, then fingered half a dozen buttons, instantly cutting off the din of many different sound tracks and causing the crowd of automousons afoot on Main Street to halt and gaze like zombies at the two champions. Everything grew still and quiet. Nature Girl could sense the million mechanisms of the world's most famous amusement park slowing to a standstill: the Mad Hatter's teacups set sedately in place, the Matterhorn bobsleds stopped in their tracks, the flying ghosts of the Haunted Mansion frozen in midair. A complete silence, eerie and profound, fell over Disneyland.

"I can turn the park on or off whenever I want," chuckled Savagina. "I control everything here. Including my army of automousons."

A cadre of stitched-together Mickey Mouse lookalikes dressed in park attendant uniforms and armed with lead truncheons and black leather whips gathered on all sides. They were staring at Nature Girl, not at Savagina — breathing heavily and staring at Nature Girl's tits with their spooky, odd-shaped eyes.

"I have a proposition for you, dear. Let me put it in simple language. Either you submit to me completely

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— and I do mean submit, and I do mean completely, starting right now with a toejob — or I'll let this mob of drooling monstrosities have you for their very own. Would you rather be my plaything — or theirs?"

Thunder rumbled in the distance, then died away. A drop of rain splashed on Nature Girl's shoulder. She stared hard at Savagina.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a single long note blown hip and free, the clarinet call of quintessential coolness. In came a bass, a snare drum, a keyboard, the whole swinging gig, each line a miracle of spontaneous improvisational grace, all the lines flowing and glowing and rolling together into a groovy blue calculus of harmony and counterpoint, the combined melodic statement so complex and ambiguous that Nature Girl didn't know whether her mind was being serenaded by the seraphim of the spheres or trampled by a herd of wild eggplants; and then the other instruments faded till all she could hear was one lonely baritone sax, raucous and sweet, a paradox of pure sound, a mellifluous shrill copacetic tight-wired honeybark reed solo for night owls in the know, a nerve-whirling brain-skirling boogie-cat Zulu-woo-woo interpretation of "Better Git It in Your Soul." Bebop and Swimmingly had arrived.

"What is that ridiculous noise?"

Savagina's silver eyes betrayed annoyance, anger, perhaps even a momentary flash of fear. She spun away from Nature Girl and stared beyond the ranks of her lecherous mousenazi park attendants.

The jazzdroids were bobbledancing down Main Street, dipping and hopping and slip-slide bopping, swaying along with their instruments held high in the air Pied Piper style — Swimmingly creating all the reed sounds with his laser clarinet; Bebop producing the bass, the snare drum, and the keyboard with his ultrasizer. Behind them, pouring through the main gates into the park, came a legion of stooped, shuffling figures, their bodies rippling with silky blue hair, their pus-whie eyes even blanker than the eyes of the automousons. As the invaders fell into step behind Bebop and Swimmingly, they brandished sharpened rulers and chanted in chorus:

The sweet smell of flesh!
The sweet smell of meat!
The dreamteachers come
when there're students to eat!

They've walked fifty miles to get here, thought Nature Girl, imagining a three-day forced march across the desert. By now they must be crazed with hunger. They've gone into a feeding frenzy.

"O.K., Savagina. You wanna play rough? Maybe you have an army of ragbag rats, but I have an army of cannibalistic wind mutants. And it looks

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like they remembered to bring their appetites with them."

"Destroy them!" shrieked Savagina, furiously waving her remote control and kicking at the nearest automouson to turn and face the enemy. "Beat their heads in! Whip them to shreds!"

A bolt of lightning zigzagged across the sky and zapped the summit of the Matterhorn, brilliantly illuminating the dark purple clouds. A split second later a thunderclap sounded with such deafening force that everyone jumped: Nature Girl, Savagina, Bebop and Swimmingly, even the mindless automousons and the ravenous, tranced-out dreamteachers. The belly of the thunderclap opened like a bursting wound, and rain cascaded down in heavy sheets, pelting all of them, hammering the streets and roofs of Disneyland with a roar that drowned out all other sound, even the mellow martial music of the jazzdroids.

The two armies hesitated, squinting at each other through the downpour. Then thunder boomed again, and they rushed forward into hand-to-hand combat. Bebop and Swimmingly were trapped in the middle. For a moment, Nature Girl saw their heads above the melee, their porkpie hats and sunglasses, their cool ironic wise ancient ethereal Abyssinian wigged-out smiles. Then they were gone, sucked down out of sight, consumed by the battle.

Carnage! Mayhem! Slaughter most perfidious and barbaric! Death screams pierced the roar of the rain. Corpses piled up in the street. Blood-stained water flooded the gutters around sewer drains clogged with severed arms and legs. The scene was so gory it looked like a clan feud in a samurai flick.

And who were the heroes in this gruesome massacre? Sing now, Muse of War — sing of Mickey 27891, a gallant young automouson who had never known love because his collie penis wasn't sewn on right, but who now delighted Ares by strangling one dreamteacher with the lash of his whip whilst pounding another into mashed potatoes with the handle. Sing, too of Miss Scaldrimple, she of the sharp eye and the sharper voice, summa cum laude in grammar, a doughty old dreamteacher who devoured the snouts off seven automousons before crumpling under Mickey 68499's lead truncheon. Sing, Muse, sing merrily and strum your lyre — for many were the warriors and all were slain.

These dummies don't know fear, thought Nature Girl. They're not gonna quit till they've wiped each other out.

As the fighting subsided, so did the rain, diminishing into a soft drizzle. Groans from the wounded and dying rose up on all sides, filling the air with a continuous singsong noise like the drone of locusts or the litany

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of a New Guinea cargo cult.

"My army . . . ," whispered Savagina.

"Your army's down the tubes. They fought to the last mouse. They're all dead — if they were ever alive."

Slowly, Savagina turned to confront Nature Girl. Her eyes couldn't have burned with hotter white flame points of psychotic rage if her brain had been an acetylene blowtorch. She pulled back her lips like a rabid wolverine, revealing her silver fangs.

"Yes, dear. They're all dead. And it's your fault. . . ."

She tossed away the remote control and rubbed her hands together.

". . . so now you, too, must die."

Nature Girl faked to the left, bobbing and weaving, then circled to the right. With an incoherent shriek, Savagina charged. At the last possible instant, Nature Girl crouched down, ducking under Savagina's lunge, then stood up fast and hard, executing a classic body flip of the type first perfected by Gorgeous George in the 1950s. Savagina somersaulted through the air and landed flat on the pavement with a sickening thud.

Staggering to her feet, the stricken cyborg let out a low groan and massaged the small of her back with both hands. Nature Girl swaggered up, seized her in a side headlock, walked her across the street, and drove her head into a lamppost.

Savagina jerked loose and lurched away. Her eyes spun like pinwheels. Oozing from a gash in her forehead came a trickle of oily greenish blood that looked like transmission fluid. For a moment, disbelief, desperation, and fear chased each other across her face. Then she mustered up a smirk and flicked her wrists, shooting out her five-inch stainless-steel stiletto-blade fingernails.

Nature Girl was ready. Leaping forward, she grabbed the cyborg's forearms, forced her to her knees, then slammed her hands down hard against the pavement. Savagina cried out in pain and dismay. Pulling free, she sprang back and stared at her fingers.

"My nails," she whimpered. "You've broken my nails. . . ."

"For a machine, you catch on fast, rotor-rump. Now ya gotta fight me fair and square."

Trembling. Savagina backed away. The storm clouds parted, and a shaft of sunlight revealed stark terror in her eyes.

"Please . . . please don't kill me. . . ."

"Don't worry, you slimy coward. I'm not gonna kill ya. Fighting to the death ain't my style. What I'm gonna do is clamp your butt in my famous super saurkraut submission hold and keep ya there till ya say uncle and apologize sincerely for all the trouble you've caused."

"Never!"

Savagina whirled and fled, stumbling over corpses and splashing through puddles of rainwater and blood.

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She's heading for Tomorrowland. Maybe that's where the Sonic Fan is located. What if she turns it back on and aims it at me? I gotta catch her first!

As Nature Girl sped off in pursuit, she felt the plastic case of the remote crunch under the heel of her boot. Dozens of sound tracks started up again. The Mad Hatter's teacups clattered into orbit; bobsleds hurtled down the Matterhorn; the phantoms in the Haunted Mansion resumed their eldritch routines. The Magic Kingdom had come to life once more.

Savagina reeled and staggered as she ran. Pursuing at full speed, Nature Girl quickly closed the gap. She was nearly close enough to tackle her fleeing foe, when the cyborg darted sideways, disappearing into a crooked little cobblestone passageway shaded by candy-striped awnings and lined on either side with souvenir stands, pinball arcades, confectionery shops, restrooms, and shooting galleries — a dense maze of nooks and crannies, the perfect place for evasive action.

I can't let her outta my sight!

Veering into the passageway, Nature Girl sprinted after Savagina around a sharp turn, then suddenly found herself in a courtyard full of engraved glass windows, wrought-iron balconies entwined with plastic vines, and styrofoam cypress trees complete with cheesecloth moss. A synthetic perfume resembling the fragrance of magnolia blossoms drifted through the air, mingling with the aromas of mock shrimp gumbo and instant Creole sauce.

New Orleans Square! But where's Savagina?

Nature Girl cast an eagle eye in all directions. For a few frustrating seconds, she was certain she'd let her quarry escape. Then she spotted Savagina skulking around the corner of the Blue Bayou Restaurant.

Now she's heading for Frontierland. Maybe she thinks she can shake me on Tom Sawyer Island. Well she's got another think coming. I don't care if she dodges her way through the whole damn park — sooner or later I'll catch her, and when I do, I'm gonna hit her so hard it'll pop her fan belt.

Gaze down, virginal Artemis — gaze down from Olympus and bless the chase. Don your saffron hunting tunic! String your bow and summon your hounds! Let the foot of the huntress be agile and fleet! Let the heart of the hunted fibrillate with fear! Watch her run like a cheetah with a hotfoot! Gaze down, chaste sister of Apollo, and cackle with glee!

Nature Girl stalked Savagina through the highest branches of the Swiss Family Treehouse, across the bottom of the Arctic Ocean in one of Captain Nemo's submarines, beyond the Milky Way in a Space Mountain rocket ship, and back to the Mesozoic Era in the dinosaur diorama on the Disneyland Railroad. She lost Savagina

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amongst a multitude of wisecracking parrots and kiwi birds in the Enchanted Tiki Room, then found her again hiding under President Lincoln's chair in the Walt Disney Story shrine. She pursued the fugitive by monorail, steamboat, skyway, jungle launch, omnibus, river raft, circus train, explorer canoe, PeopleMover, mountain railroad, keel boat, and horse-drawn streetcar, tracked her through the Country Bear Jamboree and the Golden Horseshoe Revue and America Sings, finally cornered her in the Northern European room of It's a Small World.

Savagina was huddling on a platform, trying to hide behind a bevy of animated dolls. One group of dolls rose up and down on pistons. Another group traveled in little circles round and round and round. The boy dolls were dressed in lederhosen. Some wielded shepherd's crooks, while others cradled lambs in their arms. The girl dolls wore their hair in blonde braids and carried wheels of Swiss cheese. Together they were singing the words "It's a small world after all" over and over again in shrill yet guttural German.

Nature Girl leapt from the boat she was riding and waded through the water to the platform.

"C'mon Savagina, give up. You're just a two-bit brass blowhard who's run out of gas. Your body's fulla dents, and your engine's blown a gasket. You're ready for the junkyard."

By way of response the cyborg shuddered and snarled.

Nature Girl jumped onto the platform and strutted through a group of boy dolls who were playing accordions and hoisting beer steins. Each time the steins reached an apex, some hidden mechanism caused them to overflow with foam. One stein was dribbling on Savagina's head at regular intervals. Nature Girl stood over the pathetic figure and laughed with scorn.

"Face reality, pal — you're a has-been, and I'm the champ."

"Do you really think so, dear? Perhaps you've overlooked something."

Savagina's eyes burned like the center of the sun.

"You see, dear, a few top-of-the-line cyborgs in the 2200 series come equipped with an optional suicide attack mode. You might liken it to a bee's stinger. It's my best weapon, but if I use it, I'll die in exquisite agony."

"I can see why you've been holding it in reserve."

"Yes, dear. But now I have nothing to lose."

Savagina tipped back her head and gazed up at Nature Girl. The gleam in her eyes was so nutsy, she looked like the number one attraction in the main cage at Bedlam. When a drool of foam splattered on her forehead, she didn't even blink.

"The time has come, dear. . . ."

Slowly the cyborg's mouth began

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to dilate. Something inside was stretching her lips and cheeks, straining to be born. Suddenly the skin split and her salivating needle-sharp silver fangs emerged, protruding and expanding till her whole face was nothing but a mass of teeth.

What a smile! I haven't seen such a slick set of dentures since *Aliens*.

The old Savagina was gone. She'd transformed herself into an archetype, the beast of a billion nightmares. She'd become the Mother of Teeth.

She pulled herself into a tight crouch, tensing her muscles for one last attack. Her body seemed to darken and swell with energy. Then she leapt like a bullfrog straight at Nature Girl.

Our heroine realized this was the greatest challenge she would ever face, the single ultimate test of her prowess. She responded with a natural intuitive understanding of the situation, moving like a zen master, her body flowing faster than her mind, instinctively choosing the one tactic that might save her. Ducking down, she faked like she was going to try another body flip, then jumped as high as she could, kicking her legs out like a cheerleader and using her hands to vault over Savagina's head. Neither Leaping Lenny Poffo nor Jumping Jim Brunzell could have done it any better.

Savagina lunged under Nature Girl and crashed into a cluster of boy dolls who were holding an alpenhorn and yodeling. The dolls collapsed around her, and she lay there in twisted defeat, her limbs hopelessly entangled in guy wires, her teeth gnashing.

"Please," she hissed, "put me out of my misery. . . ."

"First tell me where the Sonic Fan is."

"Never. . . ."

"Then kick the bucket yourself. Mercy killing ain't my style anyway."

Nature Girl hopped off the platform, waded through the water, and clambered into a boat.

"Wait! You can't leave me here! I can take dying in pain, but having to listen to this hideous tune is worse than Apache torture! It'll drive me stark raving mad!"

"You already are."

The boat swept Nature Girl away from Savagina, out of the Northern European room into the Polynesian room. Ranks of potbellied boy dolls with tattooed faces were gyrating grass skirts, sticking out their tongues, and merrily singing "It's a small world after all" in slurred Samoan, repeating the same line over and over and over again, endlessly. From the room behind her, Nature Girl could hear screams of torment.

She covered her ears with her hands and toughed it out for the rest of the ride. It seemed to last forever, but finally the boat emerged into the sunlight, where it followed a meandering watercourse through a topiary garden with bushes shaped like waltz-

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ing warthogs, armadillos, pangolins, cassowaries, mandrills, and komodo dragons.

Nature Girl disembarked and wandered aimlessly away from It's a Small World. On her right, empty canal boats glided through Storybook Land. On her left, driverless Autopia cars proceeded along a scenic freeway in an orderly single file like ants or sheep. Jolly music came from both attractions, but there was no one to hear it except Nature Girl.

She walked toward the center of the park, back to where she'd started. As Sleeping Beauty Castle loomed before her, the music of the rides sputtered and faded. The canal boats floated in place like lily pads. The Autopia cars slowly rolled to a stop.

The Magic Kingdom was dead again. This time it hadn't been turned off by a remote control. It had perished naturally of old age.

Poor old Disneyland, thought Nature Girl. The forces of evil have been sapping your strength for so long that finally all your enchantment is gone.

The silence overwhelmed her. She felt lost and lonely, stranded all by herself in a dead amusement park in a dying world nine hundred years in the future.

Then, from the keep of Sleeping Beauty Castle, a reedy little voice came wafting down to Nature Girl:

"Where are you, wittle mice, where are you? Tee hee hee! Nice wittle mice! Come to Professor Quantum!"

Professor Quantum? I wonder. . . .

A wild surmise jangled Nature Girl's brain. Searching for the source of the voice, she scanned the shiny white walls with their battlements and loopholes, the spires and turrets with their blue roofs and gold pennants.

"Come to Professor Quantum, wittle mice! Nice wittle mice! Chew through the Professor's ropes, and he'll give you all a big piece of cheese!"

Whoever this character is, he's way the hell up there. Maybe there's a hidden staircase of something inside the castle.

Sure enough, behind some crates of marzipan dalmatians in the storeroom of the Castle Candy Shoppe, Nature Girl discovered an old freight elevator. An empty light socket dangled from the ceiling. A tattered holographic poster taped to one wall depicted Jiminy Cricket smoking a Marlboro. A few tufts of orange hair and half a dozen dice lay scattered on the floor. She stepped in. There were just two buttons. The lower read "dungeon," the higher "watchtower."

What the hell. This Quantum better not be a Jehovah's Witness.

She pushed the higher button. The door slid shut. It was pitch-black inside. The elevator began its ascent, rising slowly by fits and starts, its cables creaking and groaning.

Seems like all I do in this lousy world of the future is go up and down in the dark. Maybe somebody's trying

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to tell me something.

Finally the elevator shuddered and came to a stop. The door slid to one side, and Nature Girl stepped out into the light. She found herself in a single large room filled with oversized audio equipment. A pair of forty-foot bass reflex speakers with cross-firing tweeters caught her eye first. Their cords covered the floor like sleeping anacondas. Next to a row of vacuum tubes the size of refrigerators sat a turntable big as a merry-go-round, with a record on it to match. What appeared to be a cockpit with a padded pilot's chair was mounted on top of an enormous quartz-phase-lock direct-drive motor. Behind the motor a titanic Tesla coil was discharging ganglia of electricity in all directions. It was quite a while before she noticed the noodleneck geek hog-tied in the corner.

"You're a nice lady!" he exclaimed. "Won't you please let Professor Quantum loose? Pretty please with sugar on top?"

"This must be the Sonic Fan! And you're the mad scientist who invented it!"

Wisps and spikes of unwashed orange hair stuck straight out from the top of his head. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of glasses with Coke-bottle lenses. Smudges of ink decorated his cheeks. The collar of his short-sleeve white shirt was tightly buttoned just below a protuberant Adam's apple. Half the shirttail hung out over his belt, and the front pocket of the shirt contained a row of mechanical pencils, a calculator, a logarithm table, a rolled-up Felix the Cat comic book, and a squished Hostess Twinkie. His pants were baggy and wrinkled and stained with grape soda. On one foot he wore an Argyle sock and a rubber shower sandal. The other foot was bare. He kept wiggling the toes — about the only movement he could make with his wrists and ankles tied together behind his back.

"I bet you created the automousons, too!"

Scowling, he looked away. After a while he shot her a suspicious sidelong glance, then giggled and rolled his eyes coquettishly.

"Mice are so nice when they're made with dice . . . where oh where are my nice wittle mice?"

"They went bye-bye to rodent heaven, pal. Just who are you anyway?"

"Dr. Bohrstein Quantum, professor of audiotelekinesis, inventor par excellence, and dice master of the twenty-ninth century. And who tee hee hee are you?"

"Nature Girl Nelson. I'm the champ, but ya don't hafta be scared of me. I ain't like that ruthless bitch Savagina. She's the one who tied ya up."

"Ooooooooooo no no no!"

He winced at the memory and wiggled his toes. Nature Girl knelt down next to him and went to work on the knot.

"Look, Professor Quantum, I'll be

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glad to set ya free. But only if ya promise you'll show me how to take apart your wind machine."

"*Time* machine! It's a *time* machine! The wittle wheezy breezy's just a side effect."

"Wittle wheezy breezy? Side effect? You mean to tell me you've blown everything off the surface of the planet and you think it's just a *side* effect?"

"Just a teeny-weey itsy-bitsy tiny wittle side effect! Yes! Tee hee hee!"

The knot gave way, and Nature Girl stepped back. Professor Quantum stretched out his limbs, then lurched unsteadily to his feet. For a moment he gazed blankly at nothing. Then he scratched his scalp with both hands, tousling his hair into an even wilder display of tendrils and tangles. It was fiery orange in color, exactly the same shade of orange as President McDonald's.

"Every once in a wittle while, a tiny wittle sacrifice must be made for science to progress! Tee hee hee! Who cares about side effects anyway? At last my time machine is ready! I've finally found the perfect werfect fuel!"

"Perfect werfect fuel?"

With a squeal of delight, Professor Quantum pulled a handful of dice out of his pocket and tossed them up in the air so they'd bounce off his head. Then he scampered like a squirrel monkey around the turntable and up into the cockpit.

"I tried Dokken and AC/DC, but they didn't work. I tried Def Leppard, Judas Priest, Scorpians, and Mötley Crüe, and every one of them fizzled. I tried Metallica, Iron Maiden, and Ratt — nothing. But finally I tried Lawrence Welk, and he was pure dynamite! Tee hee hee!"

He tossed up another handful of dice, then pulled back on a lever. The Tesla coil crackled with electricity. Slowly the giant turntable began to revolve.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

"Going back in time! Back to the twentieth century! Back to the golden age of civilization! With my army of mice, I'll conquer the whole ancient world!"

"But your mice are all dead."

"I'll make more! All I need are a few squirrels, some stray dogs and cats, and a sewing machine! Tee hee hee!"

"Wait a sec!"

The turntable was spinning rapidly now. A tonearm the size of a Sidewinder missile swung into position over the outermost groove of the prodigious platter.

It's now or never, thought Nature Girl. If this Froot Loop really has a ticket back to the twentieth century, I gotta take it.

She bounded straight across the revolving record, jerked Professor Quantum out of the cockpit, took his place in the pilot's chair, and frantical-

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ly scanned the control panel. Suddenly a burst of incredibly maudlin champagne music exploded around her like a 20-megaton sugarbomb. Just before she blacked out, her eyes focused on a flashing LED display:

TARGET DESTINATION: ASPEN 1986

This is mean Gene Okerlund, wrestling fans, and you're watching the world championship heavyweight slalom slugfest live on WTV's 'Slaughter on the Slopes'! In twenty years of broadcasting, I have never seen anything like this! It's horrible, wrestling fans! Hulk Hogan's out cold! King Kong Bundy has him pinned down with a ski across his throat! That's five hundred pounds of carnal brutality trying to crush the Hulkster's windpipe! The referee can't do a thing — he's still stuck in a snowbank! Someone has to break this up before Bundy puts Hogan in the hospital!"

Mean Gene paused to catch his breath. He was sitting in a WTV snowmobile under a ponderosa pine. Instead of his customary tux and bow tie, he was wearing a stocking cap, wool mittens, and a parka. Ice crystals sparkled in his mustache.

Suddenly his eyes bulged out at what he saw.

"Wait a second, wrestling fans! A third figure has appeared out of nowhere! It's Nature Girl Nelson! We have a big crowd here today, and they were bitterly disappointed when Nature Girl didn't show up for her snowshoe showdown with the Fabulous Moolah! We even heard an unconfirmed rumor that Nature Girl was dying from a strange new disease! But here she is now!"

Mean Gene stood up in the snowmobile and shouted into his mike.

"She sees what Bundy's doing to Hogan! She's pulling Bundy off! She's picking him up in a fireman's carry! She's throwing him down with a hog slam! She's giving him a head butt! A knee lift! A clothesline! Now she's got him in her famous broccoli supreme backbreaker! Bundy's screaming for mercy! The crowd's going wild! What a display of size, strength, agility, meanness, and guts! Yes sir, wrestling fans! You never know what to expect in the unpredictable world of professional wrestling, but one thing's for sure today — Nature Girl Nelson is alive, well, and kicking!"

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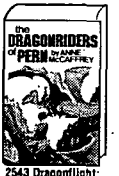

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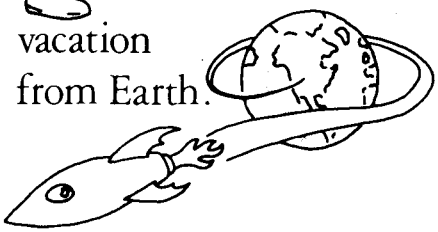

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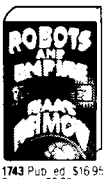

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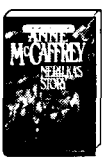

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